Stevens Initiative 2020 Virtual Exchange Grant Competition FAQs

SUBMITTING AN APPLICATION

Q: Where is the application form located?
A: The application form is accessible once you log in to Survey Monkey Apply at the site:https://StevensInitiative.smapply.io/prog/stevens_initiative_2020_virtual_exchange_grant_competition. It should be visible as the only program on the page titled "Stevens Initiative 2020 Virtual Exchange Grant Competition. To get started, please click the green "apply" button. You might be asked to create an account with the survey monkey platform and asked to confirm this account through your email address. This is an online application form, it's not a Word document.

Q: Do you provide technical support for the SurveyMonkey Apply platform?
A: While we can provide some support for applicants having technical difficulties, Survey Monkey Apply has provided a good place to begin to become familiar with the platform or to ask for help. We recommend you start there and then reach out to our team.

Q: Can documents be submitted in languages other than English?
A: No. All documents and application answers must be completed in English.

Q: Are past funded projects are listed somewhere online?
A: Yes, see http://www.stevensinitiative.org/projects/.

Q: How do you ensure that review committee members are not biased?
A: Review committee members are required to agree to a conflict of interest statement and may not be involved if they are working with any organization that is applying for an award. Committee members pledge to score applications fairly and use a scoring rubric in order to apply consistent standards to all applications.

Q: Does the total number of participants include the teachers and facilitators, or does that number specifically refer to youth participants?
A: The count of participants in the table listing both U.S. state and the Middle East and North Africa country participants should include only the youth participants who will participate in the program.

Q: Does the Stevens Initiative have a preference for lower requests for funding? Will larger requests for funding be a negative factor in the assessment of proposal?
A: All amounts within the eligible range for each type of grant are permissible and no preference is given for larger or smaller amounts within those ranges. Note that cost-effectiveness – demonstrating the requested funds would be used well – is a selection criterion for funding.

Support for Applicants

Q: How can applicants ask questions?
A: All questions should be submitted by email to stevensinitiative@aspeninstitute.org. The Initiative will host webinars to discuss the call for proposals on August 11th (general questions) (register here) and August 27th (questions about the budget and compliance) (register here). The Initiative will post webinar recordings to its YouTube channel.

Q: Can applicants arrange a call with a member of the Stevens Initiative team to discuss a proposal or ask advice about a specific project element?
A: We are not able to give advice about specific or potential proposals given our need to avoid conflicts of interest, to maintain impartiality for this federally funded open competition and due to organizational capacity. We do not plan on conducting calls with individuals or organizations. However, questions about the application or process can be sent to stevensinitiative@aspeninstitute.org and will be answered as quickly as possible.

Attachments and Templates

Q: Which of the attachments are required?
A: Applicants must complete and submit a budget, budget narrative, and partner spreadsheet. Applicants must also submit evidence of tax status, audits or financial statements, and resumes/CVs for proposed program staff. Applicants are also required to complete the subrecipient questionnaire (either foreign and domestic as applicable) and answers to this questionnaire will indicate some of the specific documents that applicants are required to submit. Applicants may but are not required to attach other documents that may be relevant to an applicant (e.g. proof of a NICRA) or may provide helpful supporting information (e.g. a letter of support) and we encourage uploading them if appropriate to your situation.

PROGRAM

Q: The application mentions sustained communication. How long should programs run?
A: The rules for each grant type specify a range of a number of contact hours and/or overall program duration. The Stevens Initiative wants to see young people engaging in a way in which they get to know each other, work together, and build relationships and a sense of trust over time through repeated synchronous or asynchronous (or a combination) communication.

Q: To what extent should everything be in place before we apply for funding?
A: Organizations should formulate plans to the greatest extent possible before applying. The more information that can be provided in the application, the better.

Q: Can an organization's programming include young people from countries outside of the MENA region in addition to students from the United States and MENA region?
A: Young people from outside the United States or the MENA region cannot be supported through a Stevens Initiative award. Refugees from MENA region countries who are currently outside the MENA region are also eligible.

Q: Might the list of eligible countries change?
A: No, the list of eligible countries – the United States and the countries in the Middle East and North Africa, as defined by the Department of State Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs – are the only eligible countries for Stevens Initiative participation through this award competition. No countries will be added or removed from this list in this competition. Organizations based or proposing to conduct work outside of these two regions are welcome to use the Initiative's other resources.

Q: Is it allowable to have implementing staff in multiple countries?
A: Yes.

Q: Is the Initiative prioritizing programs that have more significant spread across different countries in the Middle East or regions of the United States?
A: Awards support both bilateral (the United States and one other country) and multilateral programs (the United States and more than one other country) and do not prioritize one arrangement over the other.

Q: Is program participation restricted to students currently enrolled in academic programs?
A: Programs do not need to be restricted to people enrolled in education. The program does not need to be administered through an education institution.

Q: Can proposals include an in-person exchange component?
A: In-person exchange for young people, educators, facilitators, or program organizers may be included to complement the virtual exchange activities. The Initiative encourages applicants to carefully consider whether this travel is feasible in light of current conditions and to develop alternative plans in case in-person travel is not possible.

Q: What kind of supervision is expected in programs supported by the Stevens Initiative? Does every part or session of virtual exchange need to be supervised?
A: The Stevens Initiative expects adults to observe virtual exchange activities to ensure that communication is appropriate and that participants have a safe and constructive environment for discussion and collaboration. While not every synchronous or asynchronous activity needs to be directly observed in all cases, applicants should demonstrate that they plan for educators or other trained facilitators to participate in and observe an adequate number of the activities to be highly confident that communication is appropriate. The extent and style of supervision and facilitation is likely dependent on the age of participants and other factors unique to the program design and the participants involved.

Q: Do the number of students involved in the grant need to be equal between U.S. partners and MENA partners, i.e. do all online exchange activities (synchronous and asynchronous) need to be structured on a 1:1 student basis?
A: The ratio of youth participants does not need to be strictly 1:1, though we do recommend that participation be approximately balanced between the United States

and the Middle East and North Africa. Some programs provide good justification for having slightly more participants from one place or another.

Q: Could you please clarify your preferences on best practices regarding the preparation of facilitators for virtual exchange?
A: We are not in a position to recommend a specific way to train facilitators, particularly because a variety of approaches can be effective. It is important for virtual exchange programs to ensure that the adults responsible for supervising and facilitating virtual exchange are adequately prepared for their role and feel supported, and in many cases, training by experts is an important step at the beginning of a project and throughout the project, as new facilitators are trained. In many programs, facilitators are educators (teachers or professors), though in other programs, facilitators are staff members of a civil society organization or education institution. Sometimes the facilitator is a “near peer;” for example a recent university graduate who participated in virtual exchange serving as a facilitator for a high school or undergraduate virtual exchange. Effective facilitation involves familiarity with cross-cultural dialogue, using communication technology, the subject matter specific to the exchange program, and many other related topics, skills, and experiences. Effective facilitation also ensures that all participants in the program are experiencing a meaningful intercultural exchange. There are an increasing number of organizations – including many past Stevens Initiative awardees, listed on the Stevens Initiative website – who have experience conducting training programs for virtual exchange facilitators at various education or age levels.

Q: Should current geopolitical issues be taken into account when designing a proposal?
A: The Initiative expects organizations to put forward plausible, appropriate, safe plans to connect young people in the United States and the MENA region and recognizes that this could require additional effort and safeguards to ensure participants and staff are as safe and supported as possible.

Partnerships

This section covers several aspects of partnership formation and formalization for different kinds of partner relationships

Q: Can the Stevens Initiative help with finding international partners?
A: The Stevens Initiative is not able to help find international partners during the open competition phase. Organizations seeking partners may benefit from joining the conversation about virtual exchange on social media. Once awardees have been announced, the Initiative will try to include organizations, schools, and universities – including those that submitted unsuccessful applications – in awardee programs where feasible.

Q: Do we need to have all of our partnerships confirmed prior to submitting an application?
A: Some organizations may not wish to sign a contract, MOU, or other agreement with an organization until funding has been awarded. While partnerships do not need to be confirmed, strong proposals will outline feasible, appropriate partnerships, and clear

plans to confirm these partnerships if they are not confirmed at the time of submission.

Q: Is it okay for a U.S. organization or university to partner with more than one educational institution in the Middle East or North Africa?
A: Yes, it is permissible to partner with more than one institution. Note that the technical and logistical complexity of working with several partners can make larger programs challenging.

Q: Is it possible to include partnerships in another region (assuming the program also includes U.S. and MENA region participants)?
A: Stevens Initiative funding may only be used to support activities in the Middle East and North Africa and in the United States. Any other countries that might be involved in an organization's program cannot be covered through any Stevens Initiative funding.

Q: Is it expected that the program would be conducted with a partner organization? What are the expectations about engaging partners?
A: Given the international nature of this work, nearly all past proposals have involved a certain degree of international partnership. Strong virtual exchange programs are often rooted in longstanding prior collaboration between the partnering institutions. While an organization that has very deep roots and high capacity both in the United States as well as in the Middle East and North Africa might be able to put together a feasible proposal that shows adequate capacity in all countries, or a proposal could seek to use staff and effort solely in one country and then remotely connect with participants in another country, these would be outlier cases and we would encourage the organization to make sure that they have adequate capacity, whether their own or through a partnership, in all of the places where they propose to reach young people.

Q: Should partners in the Middle East and North Africa be classified as sub-recipients vs. contractors?
A: The answer to this question depends on the type of work the partner will conduct. Generally, a subrecipient provides substantive, programmatic work into the project. And generally, a contractor provides a good or service as part of the project. Each relationship determines the legal agreement needed to document that relationship: a contract will be negotiated with you, the applying organization. A subaward will be governed by the same federal regulations that govern a Stevens Initiative award recipient’s agreement. We suggest you use the contractor vs. subaward determination checklist below to help guide you.

SECTION 1 - SUBRECIPIENT

Description *: A subaward is for the purpose of carrying out a portion of a Federal award and creates a Federal assistance relationship with the subrecipient. Characteristics which support the classification of the non-Federal entity as a subrecipient include when the contrator:*

- [ ] 1. Determines who is eligible to receive what Federal assistance;
- [ ] 2. Has its performance measured in relation to whether objectives of a Federal program were met;
- [ ] 3. Has responsibility for programmatic decision making;
- [ ] 4. In accordance with its agreement, uses the Federal funds to carry out a program for a public purpose specified in authorizing statute, as opposed to providing goods or services for the benefit of the pass-through entity.

Entities that include these characteristics are responsible for adherence to applicable Federal program requirements specified in the Federal award.

SECTION 2 - CONTRACTOR

Description *: A contract is for the purpose of obtaining goods and services for the non-Federal entity's own use and creates a procurement relationship with the contractor. Characteristics indicative of a procurement relationship between the non-Federal entity and a contractor are when the non-Federal entity receiving the Federal funds:*

- [ ] 1. Provides the goods and services within normal business operations;
- [ ] 2. Provides similar goods or services to many different purchasers;
- [ ] 3. Normally operates in a competitive environment;
- [ ] 4. Provides goods or services that are ancillary to the operation of the Federal program.

Entities that include these characteristics are not subject to compliance requirements of the Federal program as a result of the agreement, though similar requirements may apply for other reasons.

FINAL DETERMINATION:

☐ **SUBRECIPIENT** ☐ **CONTRACTOR**

Q: Do we only have to use lower tiered subaward agreements with subawardees, rather than with individual schools or other participating groups?
A: The type of legal relationship between the prime applicant and the schools or participating groups depends on the nature of the work that the school will conducting, the service they will be providing, or the way the participating group will be engaging with your program. Generally, a subrecipient is providing substantive, programmatic work while a contractor is providing a good or service. We suggest you use the contractor vs. subaward determination checklist above to help guide you.

Q: Could you please provide a sample of the lower tiered sub award agreement based on the prime award agreement?
A: The lower-tiered subaward agreement must be approved by the Aspen Institute prior to execution. The Stevens Initiative has a memo that can be shared with the subrecipient on the terms and conditions that should flow down, but that will not be provided until the award negotiation phase (after applications have been submitted and reviewed).

Q: We are partnering with educational institutions and/or organizations in the United States and in the Middle East and North Africa. If no financial award is offered to these schools, do they need to complete the Domestic Subrecipient Profile Questionnaires? What type of documentation is expected from these partner schools (MOU, other)?
A: The domestic subrecipient profile questionnaire or the foreign subrecipient profile

questionnaire only needs to be completed by the applying organization, and it should be completed about their own organization. As a subrecipient to the Stevens Initiative, you are required to flow-down monitoring and oversight procedures to your partners. Some organizations find it useful to also have their partners complete the domestic or foreign subrecipient profile questionnaire because they know that it's part of their responsibility as a subrecipient to the Aspen Institute to also flow down monitoring and due diligence techniques. We encourage you to consider taking this step, though we don't require it. The questionnaire is an assessment and not a contractual agreement. Subrecipients of the prime applicant must receive a lower-tiered subrecipient agreement that contain most of the terms and conditions listed on the prime subrecipient agreement (the agreement between Aspen Institute and prime applicant). The lower-tiered subrecipient agreement must be reviewed and approved by the Aspen Institute prior to being executed. If payment is not provided, then technically a lower-tiered subrecipient agreement is not required, but there should still be a legal document, such as an MOU, that governs the relationship. If there are no legal or other barriers preventing payment, we recommend financial payment be given to implementing partners to help ensure their engagement and overall commitment to the project.

Q: Does an organization count as a subawardee if we are strictly reimbursing them for program-related expenses and there is no additional payment to them to carry out programming or provide services?
A: The relationship with the other entity will determine the type of legal agreement needed to document that relationship. If the partnership is formalized and is a deemed a subrecipient to the prime applicant, then a lower-tiered subrecipient agreement must be used that contains most of the terms and conditions listed in the prime subrecipient agreement. Generally, a subrecipient is providing substantive, programmatic work while a contractor is providing a good or service. We suggest you use the contractor vs. subaward determination checklist above in these FAQs to help guide you.

Participants and Participant Information

Q: The guidelines say that the Stevens Initiative will collect information about youth participants in the programs it supports. How will that information be used?
A: The Stevens Initiative will collect contact information for each participant in the programs supported through these awards. The information will be used to share information from the Initiative about learning and networking opportunities that are part of the Stevens Initiative alumni engagement activities. The information will also be used to invite alumni to “opt in” to the Department of State's alumni community and deidentified information will be used to assess the reach of the Stevens Initiative. Information will be kept securely.

Q: Can participants in Stevens Initiative programs receive academic credit?
A: Yes, participants can receive academic credit if it is offered by the institution through which they are participating.

Q: Does the Stevens Initiative’s definition of refugee include asylum seekers and those with humanitarian protected status?

A: Applicants are encouraged to discuss this with the Stevens Initiative on a case by case basis.

Q: I am proposing to include refugees located in the United States. Does this meet the Stevens Initiative's priority to include refugees?
A: Refugees located in the United States are welcome to participate in Stevens Initiative programs, but this in itself would not constitute an eligible virtual exchange program unless there are also participants from the Middle East and North Africa who are located outside the United States. The intention is to connect young people in the United States with young people in the Middle East and North Africa, or refugees from the Middle East or North Africa who are located outside the United States.

Additional Grant Deliverables: Monitoring and Evaluation, Alumni Engagement, Communications

(See further below for more information about the Program Attribute Variation Supplement if your organization was invited to submit that supplement)

Q: Is an IRB (institutional review board) required for an evaluation to meet the project requirements?
A: No, it is not required, though some of our awardees have gone through the IRB process. We encourage awardees to meet the standards of their field and their institution. Awardees work closely with our evaluation experts to make sure they meet common standards of evaluation, as well.

Q: Do we need to follow a uniform process for ethical research review, for which there may also be costs associated?
A: We look to each organization to determine the research standards that their community and their institution require of them. For several, that might be an IRB, for others it might be different. And we look to you to explain to us what those requirements are and we will work with you and with our independent evaluators to make sure that the research methods meet our standards as well.

Q: What is a communications campaign or project?
A: The intention is to ensure that grantees are supported in amplifying their program, which may not be feasible without support and collaboration. We are excited to work with grantees to find unique, collaborative ways to highlight programs through some sort of communications deliverable. We know that many communications campaigns and projects can take time, but think collaboration on and brainstorming well-executed campaigns and projects can be impactful for both grantees and the Initiative.

At any time throughout the period of performance, grantees can pitch a collaboration on any sort of communications project or campaign that highlights their virtual exchange program and its impact. If appropriate, the Initiative and the grantee will work together to design and execute the project or campaign. For example, a grantee may pitch a social media campaign highlighting program photos. If the Initiative approves the pitch, they will work with the grantee to flesh out the campaign, design the components (such as graphics) and execute on the Initiative's and grantees social platforms. More details about how to pitch will be shared as part of the grantee's onboarding.

Q: What are alumni action plans?
A: Alumni action plans are an expected deliverable for scaling grants only that applicants should include in their proposals to continue to engage participants after their virtual exchange programs. Alumni action plans vary depending on the learning content and structure of the virtual exchange programs but require a specific output from a stated number of your program participants during a specified period after their participation in a virtual exchange. These can take the form of a small grants program, an opportunity for alumni to continue to learn or teach others about the topic of their virtual exchange, or to engage their larger communities about virtual exchange or the competencies they developed during their virtual exchange. The Initiative is open to innovative ideas to continue to engage alumni through these action plans.

FINANCIAL/GRANT

Q: Is there a template for the budget attachment, and how do we find it?
A: This template is available to download in the application in Survey Monkey Apply. Applicants must use the provided budget template and not alter it.

Q: Can you share past budgets as examples?
A: We do not provide examples of completed budgets because budgets vary depending on program design. Please use the budget template that is included as part of the full application to guide your preparation. All line item costs must be included and fall under one of the already provided budget categories. Your program design will be the primary factor in developing your budget.

Below is a list of allowable costs. Note this is not a comprehensive list:
Salary and fringe benefits
Stipends for U.S. and International teachers directly involved in the program
Curriculum development/integration
Interpretation
Monitoring and evaluation
Internet based fees on limited basis
Communications support including website development, outreach materials, videography, and photography
Educational materials
Software or supplies such as digital cameras, webcams, laptops, etc. to support online project work
Indirect Costs

Q: Are awardees expected to propose cost share?
A: Cost share is permitted but not required.

Q: The application indicates that applicants cannot request more than 80% of the 2019 annual operating budget of the applying organization. If the applying organization has partners in the project with larger budgets, can the budget request be up to 80% of the partners' budgets?
A: No. The budget request may be no more than 80% of the 2019 annual operating budget of the applying organization.

Q: For applicants outside of the United States, can the Stevens Initiative disburse funds to U.S. partners in order to avoid wire transfer fees?
A: No. Funds to organizations based outside of the United States will be disbursed only to the primary applicant.

Q: Can funds can be shared with international partner institutions?
A: Yes.

Q: To whom do awardees report over the course of the award?
A: Awardees report to the Stevens Initiative team at the Aspen Institute, which relays information to other partners (such as the U.S. Department of State) as appropriate.

Q: Do all applicants need to conduct work for the full period of performance window?
A: Applicants are strongly encouraged but not required to work throughout the eligible period of performance. Applicants with extenuating circumstances or questions should contact the Stevens Initiative.

Q: Is it possible to include stipends for educator (teacher) participants?
A: Yes.

Q: What is "subaward" vs. "contracts" in the budget template?
A: Generally, a subrecipient or subawardee is providing substantive, programmatic work while a contractor is providing a good or service. A subrecipient is generally an entity that carries out a portion of the program but is not considered an individual or a beneficiary of the program. You can find additional information about how to classify these parties using the checklist above in this document.

Q: How will the allocated fund be distributed over the period of performance?
A: Stevens Initiative awards are cost-reimbursable, meaning that awardees will submit financial reports outlining work conducted and then receive payment The pace of payment will be determined before an agreement is signed between the applying organization and the Aspen Institute, but it is generally disbursed quarterly. Advance payments are considered on a case by case basis, and if approved, the subrecipient will be expected to submit monthly financial reports to validate their spending.

Q: Can we add expense types or categories on top of 1-5 on expense detail?
A: You may add additional rows to the budget detail section, but you cannot add budget categories to the budget. If you are adding additional rows, make sure the formulas are calculating correctly in each added row and that the budget summary section includes

the newly added rows.

Q: Can we apply indirect to either participant support or to subawards?
A: Indirect costs should be applied based on your negotiated indirect cost rate agreement (NICRA). If you do not have a NICRA, you can elect the 10% de minimis rate, which uses a Modified Total Direct Cost base (MTDC). The MTDC base means that you cannot collect indirect costs on participant support costs and only up to the first $25,000 of each subaward.

Q: What is the full definition of participant support?
A: Participant support costs are defined here in the Uniform Guidance. The definition is: *Participant support costs* means direct costs for items such as stipends or subsistence allowances, travel allowances, and registration fees paid to or on behalf of participants or trainees (but not employees) in connection with conferences, or training projects.

Q: Relating specifically to personnel cost, are there restrictions or recommendations on how much of the overall budget should be in this budget category?
A: There are no specific restrictions on how much should be allocated to staff of the prime awardee organization. Considerations however must be made to the implementing organizations as well; personnel charges being charged to the implementing organization of the prime organization should be an appropriate representation of the work they will conduct. Charges needs to be an accurate reflection of the work that will be completed by the prime awardee.

Q: Are applicants allowed to include technology hardware costs in requested budgets and what guidance is given about these types of costs?
A: Applicants can propose a reasonable cost for technology hardware (laptops, etc.) that will allow for the program to be carried out. Specific costs should be as specific as possible, broken out (e.g. listing “laptop computers,” and “internet hotspot sticks,” rather than just “technology for participants”), and should be rooted in assessed need rather than written in “as needed.” Also, if laptops (or similar hardware) are purchased, ownership and responsibility for the laptops resides with the applicant and/or partner organizations and cannot become the personal property of the participant.

The Award

Q: Does the initiative offer the possibility of grant renewal for successful grantees?
A: Seeding and efficiency grants in this competition will be eligible to apply to receive a second year of funding at the end of the first year of the program. All awardees are eligible to request new funds through future competitions. The Initiative encourages awardees to plan for other funding sources and strategies to sustain and grow the program beyond the period of Stevens Initiative support.

Q: When will applicants be notified that they are receiving a Stevens Initiative award?
A: The Initiative aims to make funding decisions by late 2020 and begin negotiating

awards in early 2021. The Initiative will publicly announce award recipients in April or May of 2021.

Q: Are the funds for this award 100 percent from the U.S. government?
A: Grant funds will be from the U.S. government, with the exception of funds for the Program Attribute Variation Supplement, which will be from the Bezos Family Foundation.

Other

Q: Can an applicant participate in more than one proposal, e.g. be an applicant on one proposal and be a partner on another proposal?
A: Yes, if the proposed programs are distinct.

Q: Is this competition open to applications from organizations that do not currently run virtual exchange?
A: Yes.

Q: Can an organization submit more than one application?
A: Yes, if the programs are distinct, with different staff, content, budgets, participants, etc., an organization can submit more than one application.

Q: Are past recipients of Stevens Initiative funds eligible to apply?
A: Yes, past Stevens Initiative grant recipients are eligible to apply.