Request for Proposals (RFP): Participation in the Southwestern Pennsylvania (SWPA) Regional Initiative

January 2026
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Issued by: Ithaka S+R
In partnership with: Pittsburgh Scholar House (PSH)
Supported by: The Heinz Endowments
Proposal Deadline: Friday, January 30, 2026

1. Overview

Ithaka S+R invites colleges and universities in Southwestern Pennsylvania to apply to participate in a new regional initiative focused on re-engaging adult learners, particularly adults with some college but no credential. The initiative brings together a cohort of institutions committed to designing and implementing a shared, student-centered model that improves outreach, re-enrollment, persistence, credential completion, and career readiness for adult learners balancing work, family, and financial responsibilities.

Building on lessons from the Ohio College Comeback Compact and the Pennsylvania Adult Learner Re-Engagement Community of Practice, participating institutions will collaborate during an initial planning phase from January through June 2026. During this period, institutions will assess readiness, identify barriers to adult learner success, and co-develop a coordinated approach to outreach, enrollment workflows, financial and administrative barrier reduction, advising, basic needs support, and data sharing.

Following planning, the initiative will move into implementation beginning in Summer 2026, with coordinated outreach to prospective learners and re-enrollment starting in Spring 2027 and continuing through Spring 2028. The project is funded by The Heinz Endowments and implemented by Ithaka S+R in partnership with Pittsburgh Scholar House. Through this work, participating institutions will strengthen their capacity to serve adult learners while contributing to regional workforce needs and economic mobility.

Eligible institutions are invited to submit a proposal following the instructions outlined in the sections below by January 30, 2026. Eligible applicants include:

- Public and private, two- and four-year colleges and universities located within the Southwestern Pennsylvania region.
- Institutions committed to expanding opportunities for adult learners and willing to collaborate as part of a regional initiative.

If you have questions about your eligibility, please contact Liz Looker (elizabeth.looker@ithaka.org) prior to submitting your application.

2. Details of the initiative

2.1 Project goals

Participating institutions will work collaboratively to increase access to high-quality credential pathways for adult learners in Southwestern Pennsylvania. The initiative aims to address the financial, administrative, and basic needs barriers that prevent adults from re-enrolling and persisting, while also designing a collaborative model for outreach, enrollment, and support of adult learners. Through this work, institutions will improve their readiness to serve adult learners, particularly those balancing work, family responsibilities, and financial constraints. Collectively, participating institutions will contribute to regional efforts to close the workforce credential gap and strengthen economic mobility.

2.2 Planning phase activities (January - June 2026)

Before submitting an application, institutions should participate in an introductory meeting with Ithaka S+R and partners to learn more about the initiative. Institutions will also attend a webinar about the opportunity on January 21, 2026, from 11:00–11:45 a.m. ET, or watch the recording. **To register for the webinar and view the recording when it is available, see the** [RFP landing page](#)**.**

Institutions will then submit proposals for participation by January 30, 2026 and will receive notification of selection by February 6, 2026.

During the planning phase, selected participants will:

- Complete the Readiness Inventory. The inventory includes components related to admissions and re-enrollment processes; financial and administrative barriers such as balances, holds, and transcript access; advising and persistence supports; and basic needs infrastructure, including housing, food, transportation, and childcare.

- Participants will engage in structured planning sessions, as well as monthly convenings and working groups, with Ithaka S+R, PSH, and cohort institutions. They will also contribute to the refinement of a shared model for outreach to prospective adult learners; re-enrollment workflows; reduction of barriers to enrollment; case management, basic needs support, and wraparound services; and data sharing and measurement of learner progress.

- Institutions will identify a cross-functional team and provide data to support outreach and coaching to learners.

2.3 Implementation phase activities (Summer 2026–Spring 2028)

While the specific activities of the implementation phase will be determined during the planning period, institutions should anticipate the following core components. First, institutions will participate in coordinated outreach to adult learners with support from a trusted third-party vendor beginning in Summer 2026. Institutions will support the re-enrollment of eligible learners from Spring 2027 through Spring 2028 and adopt revised processes or policies, as feasible, that reduce barriers to adult student entry and increase persistence. Throughout the implementation phase, institutions will engage in ongoing collaboration with program partners on measurement, reporting, and continuous improvement.

3. Proposal requirements

Proposals should be **no more than three pages** and address the following:

3.1 Institutional commitment and motivation

Proposals should describe the institution's motivation for participating in the initiative and how this work aligns with institutional mission, priorities, and strategic goals. Applicants should confirm that senior leadership endorses participation and will allocate staff time for planning and implementation. Proposals should also confirm that the institution has identified funding or capacity to support adult learner initiatives, commits to tracking

outcomes related to re-enrollment, persistence, and completion, and agrees to participate in program meetings, data sharing, and joint learning activities.

3.2 Implementation team

Proposals should identify the members of the institutional team who will participate in planning and implementation, including names and roles. Teams should include at least one senior leader and representatives from key functional areas, which are expected to include admissions for returning and adult students, student support, student records, financial aid, and student accounts. Proposals should also designate an institutional lead who will serve as the project manager or primary point of contact.

3.3 Capacity and readiness

Proposals should describe existing supports for adult learners at the institution, including relevant programs, initiatives, or infrastructure such as adult student services, basic needs centers, or completion initiatives.

3.4 Barriers and opportunities

Applicants should outline key challenges the institution faces in re-engaging adult learners, including financial or administrative barriers that may require policy adjustments. Proposals should also describe opportunities for partnership or innovation that participation in the initiative could support.

3.5 Data capacity

Applicants should describe their anticipated ability to provide contact and student account information for stopped-out students, including information related to holds and past-due balances. Proposals should also describe current systems used to track and support adult learners.

4. Timeline

Milestone	Date
RFP Released	January 12, 2026
Proposals Due	January 30, 2026
Institutions Notified of Selection	February 6, 2026
Planning Phase	January–June 2026
Outreach to Learners Begins	Summer 2026
First Learners Enroll	Spring 2027

5. Submission instructions

Please submit proposals as a single PDF to:
Joanna Dressel, joanna.dressel@ithaka.org
Subject line: *SWPA Application for Participation – [Institution Name]*

Questions may be directed to:
Elizabeth Looker (elizabeth.looker@ithaka.org) and Joanna Dressel
(joanna.dressel@ithaka.org)

6. Evaluation criteria

Proposals will be evaluated on:

- Demonstrated commitment to serving adult learners.
- Institutional readiness and capacity to participate.
- Strength of the proposed team.
- Willingness to collaborate regionally and align with shared processes.
- Potential for impact on adult learner access, persistence, completion, and workforce development.

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