



Postsecondary AI Funding Landscape Research

LETTER OF PROPOSAL TO ECMC FOUNDATION

ECMC
Foundation



Executive summary

ECMC Foundation is forming a grantmaking perspective on AI at a moment when the field's public record is highly opaque. The organizations most visible in AI philanthropy are frequently not the ones committing money, and several of the funders committing the most money say little to nothing about it publicly. A landscape scan assembled from funder websites and press releases, which is how most such scans are assembled, will produce a confident but undercounted answer.

We know this because we tested it. Before writing this proposal we ran the peer screen the RFP describes, working outside-in from Form 990 filings, audited financial statements, federal award records and funder grant databases across sixty funders, corporations and pooled vehicles. The screen produced a finding that changes what the commissioned research has to do: **five of ECMC's five closest peers have little AI content on their public strategy pages, and four of the five are nonetheless investing heavily in AI grant-making.**

A scan built from those websites would conclude these organizations do not fund AI, and would be wrong by roughly \$9.6 million in dated, primary-sourced commitments. Ascendium is the clearest case. It has committed \$6.25 million to AI work, carries no AI language across three strategy pages, and mentions AI exactly once in a \$172.6 million annual report.

The second thing we built is the instrument that accompanies this proposal as our primary work sample. It holds twenty-five sources, twenty claims traced to verbatim passages, and eight alignment verdicts, and it exists to answer one question: Is AI money reaching the problems that decide whether underserved students finish?

On the present evidence, mostly it is not.

- No funder's AI portfolio names equity-gap closure as its outcome metric.
- Predominantly Black Institutions (PBI's) and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISI's) do not appear in any national AI instrument we reviewed.
- The grants are clustered where the completion evidence is less good, and capacity accumulates at research universities while the modal broad-access institution holds no AI policy, no dedicated staff and no budget line. That misalignment sits directly on ECMC's North Star.

We propose a five-month engagement, November 2026 through March 2027, delivering the full scope of work in the RFP: interviews with fifteen to twenty peer funders, a synthesis of the current state of AI across the five institutional domains, and the two mapped against each other to identify saturation and opportunity.

Persistence, completion and post-completion outcomes are the lens throughout, and the institutions serving the largest numbers of low-income and first-generation learners are the segment we hold the analysis to. The total investment is **\$150,000**, inclusive of twelve months of hosting and model usage for the instrument ECMC retains. Because the baseline already exists, every interview opens from a documented hypothesis with a falsification test attached, which will allow these conversations to have utmost depth.

Technical approach

The RFP asks for a plan for data collection and analysis. Ours is organized around a single methodological commitment, that every claim is based on the veracity of its source, and the distinction between what is confirmed, what is reported and what we inferred stays visible in the deliverable (i.e., instead of being buried in a “methodology appendix”).

What is already established

The engagement begins from two distinct pieces of already completed work. The peer screen run for this proposal covers sixty funders, corporations and pooled vehicles, with sixteen mapped topics and twenty-four method findings, each traced to a primary source. The current instrument covers the evidence side: twenty-five sources, twenty traced claims, ten student-success practices and eight alignment verdicts. We outline four results from our pre-research phase that shape the design of the commissioned work.

Public strategy is not a proxy for portfolio. Carnegie’s own grants database returns zero results for artificial intelligence while its board minutes list eleven such grants totalling \$6.75 million, because the database does not index purpose text. As another example, Trellis committed \$875,000 to Austin Community College in March 2026 and has never mentioned it on its own site.

Headline dollars are mostly not cash. AWS’s \$500 million is per-student license value. Salesforce’s earlier \$50 million was waived fees on a window that has closed. Walmart’s approximately \$1 billion is an internal employee training budget. Microsoft’s \$4 billion split is not published anywhere, including its own 2025 Impact Summary. Any table that places these beside a foundation grant budget misstates the field by an order of magnitude.

No peer funder has published an AI learning agenda. Question 1(d) of the RFP asks what those agendas are. On present evidence the answer is that they do not exist, which turns the deliverable into an opportunity for ECMC to author a credible start from its own mission and values.

The equity frame is missing from the field, not just from the grants. No funder’s AI portfolio in our corpus names equity-gap closure as its outcome metric. Where outcomes are named at all, the language is reach and adoption, not persistence or gap closure. PBI’s and AANAPISI’s are invisible in every national AI instrument we reviewed. This is the clearest overlap we found between ECMC’s North Star and an unoccupied position in the funding landscape, and the round of interviews, detailed in the next section, will confirm, modify, or refute this finding.

Phase 1: Data collection

Peer funder interviews

Fifteen-to-twenty semi-structured interviews of sixty-to-ninety minutes each. ECMC's Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) cohort is confidential to the Foundation and, because each CEP cohort is chosen by the funder who commissions it, that list is not publicly recoverable. Our reconstruction for ECMC intersects CEP's published participant roster with postsecondary and workforce fit and produces thirty-two candidates. We will confirm or correct that list against ECMC's actual cohort in the first week, and our instrument's cohort builder recomputes that analysis when the list changes, so any corrections would be near real-time.

We will propose adding a second stratum. The RFP's Key Consideration 2 permits other foundations as case points. Those with the largest verified AI commitments in postsecondary, including Lilly Endowment at up to \$500 million and the federal FIPSE track at \$50.9 million, would not surface from a mission-defined peer cohort, and we propose being more comprehensive in approach.

Each interview protocol we use will be built from the funder's existing profile, so interviews open on specifics and can skip orientation for the most part. Where the public record shows activity without strategy is where we focus our questions first, and where it shows strategy without activity is also of paramount importance. Every profile has a falsification test stating what evidence would overturn our initial reading, which, in turn, largely informs the interviews.

Evidence review

Continued primary-source review across Form 990 and 990-PF schedules, audited financial statements, federal award records and grantee announcements, extending the baseline in the two areas it is currently thinnest: institutional need evidence for transforming operations and student experience, and the six peer funders for which we hold verified grantmaking figures.

Phase 2: Synthesis

Three analytical products, each of which already exists in draft in the baseline and will be rebuilt on interview evidence.

- **Funder themes.** Strategy, theory of action, topics, committed dollars separated into cash and in-kind, and learning agenda, across the confirmed cohort.
- **Institutional need.** The five RFP domains, each rated for the strength of the evidence standing behind claims made about it. In the baseline, none of the five rates strong, two rate thin and three rate mixed.
- **The saturation and opportunity map.** The two mapped against each other. The baseline finding is that funder attention and evidence strength run in opposite directions: the two most-funded topics, tutoring and advising, rest on the weakest evidence in the corpus, while the best-evidenced need, data infrastructure and governance sequenced ahead of tools, has no identified funder in the peer cohort.

Phase 3: Deliverables

The RFP specifies four. We propose those four and one addition.

- **Full research report**, with every claim graded and sourced.
- **Executive summary** suitable for Board circulation.
- **Visual framework diagram**, delivered both as a static exhibit for print and as the interactive map in the instrument.
- **Presentation to staff**, on site.
- **The instrument itself**, transferred to ECMC with twelve months of hosting and model usage included in the fee, and with the underlying data delivered in open formats so it survives independently of Lynnerup & Ansell.

Why we include the interactive, Web-based instrument. The AI funding landscape will change materially between award in October 2026 and delivery in March 2027, and again in the year after. A static report is dated on arrival. A refreshable one lets ECMC re-run the analysis when the cohort, the evidence or the field moves, and lets the team point the same method at the next question without re-commissioning the research.

Work plan and timeline

Five months, November 2026 through March 2027, sequenced so that the interview round begins early and we have enough time for synthesis. Three dependencies help define the schedule:

- Cohort confirmation gates everything, because interview scheduling cannot begin until the list is settled, which is why it sits in week one.
- The synthesis cannot start until the interview round is substantially complete, so the December read-out doubles as the checkpoint on whether Phase 1 has produced enough to build on.
- Report drafting waits on the advisory review, which we schedule in February so a negative review still leaves time to act on it.

We detail to these phases below.

Phase	Timeframe	Activities	Deliverables and milestones
Mobilization	Nov, weeks 1–2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirm or correct the peer cohort against ECMC's CEP list. • Agree on any additions. • Confirm the learning questions. • First touchpoint with ECMC's organizational strategy consultant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirmed cohort and interview list. • Agreed protocol. • Instrument re-baselined to the confirmed cohort.
Phase 1 Data collection	Nov–Dec	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fifteen to twenty peer funder interviews. • Continued primary source review. • Rolling capture into the evidence base as each interview closes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview log with graded findings. • Extended evidence base. • Interim read-out to ECMC staff in mid-December.
Phase 2 Synthesis	Jan–Feb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theme identification across funders. • Mapping of funder strategy against institutional need. • Gap and saturation analysis. • Working session with ECMC staff on the draft map. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft themes memo. • Draft saturation and opportunity map. • Second touchpoint with the organizational strategy consultant.
Phase 3 Deliverables	Feb–Mar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report drafting and internal review. • External advisor review of the draft. • Revision. • Instrument finalization and handover. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full report. • Executive summary. • Visual framework. • Staff presentation. • Instrument and data transfer.

Staff roles, responsibilities and level of effort

Role	Responsibility	Hours
Senior Partners Rasmus Lynnerup and Charles Ansell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall accountability. • All fifteen to twenty peer funder interviews. • Ownership of the synthesis, the saturation analysis and the evidence-grading protocol. • External advisor engagement. • Staff presentation. 	240
Project Lead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Day-to-day delivery management. • Primary-source retrieval and verification, 990 schedule review, federal award data. • Interview scheduling and logging. Instrument data maintenance and the ECMC staff reaction channel. 	120
Total		360

Both partners deliver the work themselves. Neither sits in an oversight role. Partner time appears as a single consolidated line because the two divide interviews and analysis flexibly, not by fixed allocation. On a research engagement of this size, partner-delivered interviews are what determine whether peers speak candidly about strategy they have chosen not to publish.

Stakeholder engagement

ECMC internal staff. Three structured touchpoints instead of a single delivery at the end:

- an interim read-out in December while findings can still redirect the interview round,
- a working session on the draft map in February, and
- the final presentation in March.

Between these, the instrument gives staff a standing reaction mechanism. Staff can respond to any cell in the map, flag disagreement and add context, and we capture that input and include in synthesis. Thus, stakeholder engagement is on-demand and continuous, in addition to the three meetings.

External advisors and field experts. We will convene a small advisory group of three to four reviewers drawn from institutional research, state system leadership and evaluation methodology, to review the draft findings before delivery. Their role is adversarial, as they critically identify where we have over-read thin evidence. We will name proposed advisors in collaboration with ECMC.

Practitioners. The RFP marks this optional. We recommend including it and propose four-to-six conversations with system and institutional leaders at broad-access institutions to resolve it.

Coordination with ECMC's organizational strategy consultant. The RFP anticipates one to two touchpoints. We have scheduled them at kick-off and at the start of synthesis, which are the two points where duplication is most likely and where alignment most affects the output.

Qualifications and experience

Organizational overview

Lynnerup & Ansell is a higher education strategy firm working with university systems, institutions and philanthropy on completion, credit mobility, performance management and the practical integration of technology into student success. Our engagements are partner-delivered. We are proposing this work solo, with no subcontractors.

Experience in AI, philanthropy and higher education

- **AI institutional transformation.** Strategic project management backbone for the Axim Collaborative's AI Transformation HBCU Cohort, coordinating Ed Advancement and UNCF through development of an AI Starter Kit and an AI maturity diagnostic across six institutions, with explicit design for replication to community colleges and MSIs.
- **AI in a large urban system.** Work with the City University of New York on AI-driven capability building and on integrating data-to-action practice with the Chancellor-level performance management process across twenty-six institutions.
- **Philanthropic research and infrastructure.** Engagements with the Gates Foundation on learning mobility and credit mobility, including the design of data and measurement infrastructure intended to be adopted by other funders and systems.
- **Landscape research at national scale.** A fifty-state assessment of learning mobility infrastructure, delivered as an interactive analytical instrument in addition to written reports.

Key personnel

Rasmus Lynnerup, Senior Partner

Over twenty years spanning strategy consulting and executive roles in the public and civic sectors. Vice President at Arizona State University. Executive Vice Chancellor, serving as Chief Strategy Officer and Chief Academic Officer, at the City Colleges of Chicago, where he led the Reinvention reform program. Principal at the Civic Consulting Alliance. Strategy and operations consulting with McKinsey & Company in Europe and North America. A first-generation college student whose work centers on making public higher education more transparent and more integrated.

Charles Ansell, Senior Partner

Deep experience designing and executing student success reform across urban institutions, statewide systems and national networks. Vice President at Complete College America (CCA), where he launched their AI publications and AI Council. Because of his leadership, CCA is among the few national intermediaries running

institutional AI adoption work with broad-access colleges His portfolio included credit mobility, student success, and guiding institutions on the responsible integration of AI. Chief Operating Officer for the Community College System of New Hampshire. Senior Associate Vice Chancellor at the City Colleges of Chicago, where he designed and implemented a systemwide structured pathways model.

Work samples

Both work samples are live and can be opened now. Neither is a mockup.

- **The Postsecondary AI Observatory**, the instrument built for this proposal and the most direct evidence we can offer of both method and capability. Twenty-five sources, twenty claims traced to verbatim passages, ten student-success practices, eight alignment verdicts, and a provenance record behind every figure on screen. It also carries a grounded question interface that answers only from the claim ledger and says so when the corpus cannot settle something. It was built in two days.
ecmc-ai.lynnrupansell.ai · access code **LynnerupAnsell-2026**
- **The geography of learning mobility**, a fifty-state interactive assessment of learning mobility infrastructure across institutions, systems and state policy. Delivered to a national funder as an analytical instrument in place of a report.
50.lynnrupansell.ai

The peer funder screen described in the technical approach, covering sixty funders, corporations and pooled vehicles, is a separate research product and is available on request in full, with every figure backed-up by its source and grade.

In addition, as mentioned above, Charles Ansell launched and led the following while at Complete College America: The [CCA AI Readiness Consortium](#), [Attainment with AI](#), and the [AI Divide](#) along with the CCA AI Council.

Budget and budget narrative

Line item	Hours	Amount
Senior Partner (Rasmus Lynnerup and Charles Ansell)	240	\$108,000
Project Lead	120	\$27,000
<i>Professional fees subtotal</i>	360	\$135,000
Expenses: travel, accommodation, hosting, compute and token usage, twelve months		\$15,000
Total fixed investment	360	\$150,000

Budget narrative

Rates and indirect costs. The rates above are fully loaded. Lynnerup & Ansell does not apply a separate indirect or overhead charge; firm overhead, insurance, professional development, software licensing and administrative support are carried within the hourly rates. There is no subcontractor line, since we are proposing this work driven by the Firm. Fees are quoted as a fixed price. The blended rate across all staff is \$375 per hour over 360 hours.

Partner time. Senior Partner hours are presented as a single line covering both partners. Interviews and analysis divide between them by funder relationship and subject matter, and both work across the full engagement window.

Expenses. The \$15,000 expense line appears consolidated here and itemized line-by-line in the accompanying budget workbook. It covers travel and accommodation for the on-site staff presentation and working sessions in Los Angeles, twelve months of hosting, compute and token usage for the instrument ECMC retains, data acquisition for the primary-source sweep, and interview recording and transcription. Interviews are conducted remotely, which is both what peer funders prefer and what allows twenty of them inside the schedule. Technology sits inside the total instead of appearing as an add-on.

Payment. We propose invoicing in five equal monthly installments of \$30,000 across the engagement, or against phase milestones if ECMC prefers.

Optional add-on cost items

Add-on	Cost
Additional peer funder interviews beyond twenty, per interview, including profile build and synthesis	\$2,400
Instrument hosting, compute and token usage, per additional year	\$9,000
Board presentation, prepared and delivered	\$6,500
Field-facing public version of the landscape, prepared for external release	\$18,000
Annual refresh of the full landscape in year two, including a re-run of the primary-source sweep	\$34,000

Intellectual property and data ownership

All final deliverables become the property of ECMC Foundation, and all data created for the project is transferred at completion in open, non-proprietary formats.

Proprietary data disclosure. The RFP requires advance disclosure of any proprietary data used. We disclose the following:

- The instrument accompanying this proposal was built on a Lynnerup & Ansell research and analysis platform developed at our own cost before this solicitation.
- The platform code is pre-existing firm intellectual property. We propose to license it to ECMC Foundation in perpetuity, at no cost, for ECMC's own use, and to transfer the complete evidence base, all interview data, all analysis and all deliverables outright.
- No third-party licensed dataset is used. All source material is public record or generated by us.

References

Three references for comparable work are provided below. All have agreed to be contacted.

Reference	Engagement	Contact
Philipp Schmidt VP of Technology Innovation	Axim Collaborative - AI Starter Kit	pschmidt@axim.org ; (510) 394-7195
Elizabeth Reilley Chief AI Officer	University of North Carolina – Multiple Engagements	emreilley@northcarolina.edu ; (609) 468-4890
Cheryl Hyman Principal Officer	Gates Foundation – Multiple Engagements	cheryl.hyman@gatesfoundation.org