



Request for Proposals (RFP)

Choose Ohio First

RFP Release Date: December 17, 2025

Submission Date: March 2, 2026, 11:59 p.m.

Program Purpose

Choose Ohio First (COF) is Ohio's signature STEM scholarship program – designed to grow Ohio's talent pipeline in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and increase the number of qualified STEM teachers at both the K-12 and collegiate levels.

ODHE will award funding for scholarships with the expectation that institutions will commit to increase the total number of students enrolling and completing STEM degrees and credentials. ODHE will closely evaluate past performance and enrollment growth projections in applications.

All COF proposals must include work-based learning opportunities for scholarship recipients. Examples include robust co-op education, internships, laboratory research, or similar experiences supporting permanent employment in Ohio.

Proposals that are integrated with the strengths of the regional economy by demonstrating the ability to increase enrollment and completion in STEM programs, aligned with JobsOhio's target economic sectors, connect students with Ohio-based employers filling critical jobs and/or jobs offering strong wages, and/or have been identified by JobsOhio and/or the Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation will receive additional consideration.

Eligible Applicants

Ohio's state universities and colleges, as well as independent, non-profit four-year colleges and universities, are eligible applicants. Each institution may be the lead applicant in no more than one proposal. Collaboration with other institutions is encouraged. Joint proposals must be submitted by a single leading institution, following the format and required elements described in this RFP.

Eligible and Priority Academic Disciplines

Choose Ohio First uses CIP codes on the **FY26 Choose Ohio First Eligible CIP List** to identify eligible STEM programs. Only programs matching this CIP list will be considered for funding. Eligible students must declare a major or pursue a credit eligible degree or certificate matching eligible CIP codes.

The FY26 Choose Ohio First Eligible CIP List can be found here:

[FY26 CIP List Choose Ohio First 12.11.2025.pdf](#).

CIP Code 240101, Associate of Science, is not on the FY26 Choose Ohio First Eligible CIP List but students in this CIP may be eligible for COF if they are in an eligible STEM pathway.

The Associate of Science Guidance Memo has important information regarding eligibility.

https://dam.assets.ohio.gov/image/upload/highered.ohio.gov/cof/Associate%20of%20Science%20Guidance%20Memo_FINAL_5.26.23.pdf.



Award Amounts and Program Period

The FY26 Choose Ohio First Funding cycle will award up to \$31 million to selected institutions. Awards will utilize a performance-based funding model.

Selected institutions will be awarded a total maximum amount of funds to be drawn down over a four-year program period, May 1, 2027, through June 30, 2031. Each year, ODHE will evaluate the performance of the institution and issue a dynamic annual award letter based on performance.

The maximum amount an existing Choose Ohio First institution can request is calculated based on actual expenditures. Institutions should reference the letter notifying the institution of the maximum award amount they may apply for in the FY26 RFP cycle based on actual expenditures in prior years.

Proposals must use the COF Excel Application Form to calculate enrollment commitments. Proposal requests must specify projected enrollment and completion growth.

Funding decisions will consider the institution's commitment to increase enrollment and completion in STEM programs. Annual awards will similarly be revised and aligned with performance, including completions, enrollment growth and overall progress toward growth in STEM fields.

Annual awards may be reduced mid-cycle if performance falls short of the institution's proposal.

Funding amounts in future years are subject to the appropriation of future Ohio General Assemblies, Controlling Board approval, performance of grantees, and the goals of the award cycle.

Eligible Use of Funds

Choose Ohio First funds are intended to be used only for student scholarships – to be applied toward tuition and general fees, lab fees, book vouchers, and meal plans.

General fees are defined as those assessed uniformly to all students and those that do not allow for a waiver to be offered to any student(s).

A list of approved institutional general fees for public institutions may be reviewed here: <https://highered.ohio.gov/data-reports/key-topic-areas/dr-tuition-financial-aid/data-reports-tuition-financial-aid>.

Institutions must specifically list and itemize "Choose Ohio First scholarship" in financial aid award letters, tuition billing invoices, institutional website portals and similar communications with students in which the Choose Ohio First scholarship is a component of the student's overall financial aid package.

Institutions may not use any portion of funds for administration.

Student Eligibility and Scholarships

Ohio Revised Code (ORC) 3333.66 establishes a minimum student award of \$1,500 for Choose Ohio First scholarships working towards a degree program (ORC 3333.66 (A)(1)) and a minimum student award of \$500 (ORC 3333.66 (A)(2)) for scholarships working toward a certificate, each academic year.



The maximum allowable student award is one half of the highest in-state undergraduate instructional and general fees charged by all state universities.

The maximum scholarship for AY2027-2028 has not been determined at the time of this RFP.

For reference, the 2025-2026 maximum per student award is \$9,260:

https://dam.assets.ohio.gov/image/upload/v1758565119/highered.ohio.gov/cof/FA_25-26_FINAL_rev.9.22.25.pdf.

Both full-time and part-time students may receive COF scholarships. To be eligible for a Choose Ohio First scholarship, students must be:

- An Ohio resident seeking an undergraduate or graduate degree, or a for-credit certificate in a program of study that has a CIP code on the FY26 Choose Ohio First Eligible CIP List; and
- Be new to the program of study at the institution; and
- Meet the institution's eligibility criteria.

Proposal Submission

Proposals must be submitted through the ODHE RFP Portal <https://rfp.ohiohighered.org/> beginning December 18, 2025, and are due no later than March 2, 2026, at 11:59 PM.

Complete proposals consist of three (3) electronic files uploaded to the RFP portal.

1. An Executive Summary of the proposal submitted as a Microsoft Word file.
2. The COF FY26 Application Excel File with tabs 2-5 completed.
 - Tab 1: Instructions
 - Tab 2: Contacts
 - Tab 3: CIPs
 - Tab 4: Enrollment Growth Pledge
 - Tab 5: Budget Table
3. One PDF of the complete proposal which includes the Executive Summary and the COF FY26 Application Excel File. Joint proposals must have a completed FY26 Application Excel File for each institution.

Proposal Review Process and Timeline

Applicants are responsible for timely submissions of proposals. Proposals become property of ODHE and are subject to public record laws of the state. Proposals containing all the required elements will receive consideration but are not guaranteed funding. Proposals will be evaluated in compliance with the competitive process in Ohio Revised Code (ORC) 3333.62. The Chancellor shall make the final decisions based on the quality of the proposal in addressing the RFP criteria.

The President of selected institutions will be notified of the award. All awards are subject to Controlling Board approval. If requested, fiscal agents must attend the Controlling Board meeting when proposals are considered for funding.



The schedule below may be revised by ODHE due to circumstances. Changes will be communicated to the applicants via the RFP portal.

Request for Proposals (RFP) Release Date:	December 17, 2025
Informational Webinar	TBD
Proposals Due:	March 2, 2026, 11:59 P.M.
Proposal Review Begins:	March 3, 2026
Public Meeting:	TBD
Notification of Awarded Proposals:	Summer 2026

Applicants can submit questions via email to COF@highered.ohio.gov, through February 20, 2026 and will be included in a FAQ document posted on the ODHE RFP portal. It is the applicant's responsibility to check the RFP portal for updates to the FAQs.

Proposal Requirements

Format

Proposals must be submitted in a standard font, 11 point and double spaced with one-inch margins; there is an exception for tables and images, where the font may be single spaced. Please see below for page allocations for each section. ODHE is not obligated to review pages beyond the stated maximums.

Proposals should follow the outline below and each section should be clearly marked.

Proposal Criteria

1. Cover Letter (one page maximum)

The cover letter must include an endorsement of the proposal by a senior leader at the institution, the name of the institution(s) and identify the primary contact.

2. Executive Summary (two pages maximum)

3. Project Narrative: (twenty-one pages maximum; 100 points total):

Project narratives are required to address each of the following sections, a-f.

a) Project Description and Rationale (10 Points)

Describe the proposed Choose Ohio First program and the rationale behind the proposal. Applicants should address:

- How the proposal is integrated with the university's or college's mission and does not displace existing resources already committed to the mission (ORC 3333.62(C)).
- How the university or college has committed to, or demonstrated, an increase in total graduates within the disciplines of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics or science, technology, engineering, or mathematics education, consistent with a goal to increase the total



number of Ohio residents in the workforce who are highly qualified in these disciplines (ORC 3333.62(D)).

- How the proposal facilitates the completion of a degree or a certificate in a cost-effective manner, for example, transfer agreements or other advantages beyond reducing the cost of tuition (ORC 3333.62(F)).
- How the proposal encourages students to complete a certificate program of value (ORC 3333.62(G)).
- The applicant's past performance with COF, including but not limited to increased enrollment in eligible programs, success with degree and certificate completions, use of funds, timeliness of required reports and payment files, and the results of financial aid audits.
- The estimated total four-year budget and average per-student scholarship amount, how scholarship amounts will be determined, and who will be responsible for ensuring scholarship funds are utilized. Joint proposals must describe the financial relationship between the collaborating institutions.
- How the institution proposes to meet the required 1:1 matching funds using institutional or other resources. Matching funds should be supported by letters of commitment with specific amounts.

b) Recruitment Strategy (10 Points)

Describe and explain the institution's Choose Ohio First scholar recruitment and selection strategy, including the institution's confidence in meeting pledged growth. Provide relevant data and references to institutional priorities.

c) Student Support (10 Points)

Describe and explain how the institution will support students with on-time completion, preparing students for work-based learning experiences, and other support necessary for success. Identify the individual(s) who will lead the student support efforts.

d) Work-Based Learning (25 points)

Describe and explain how the institution will ensure one hundred percent (100%) of Choose Ohio First Students will participate in work-based learning through a co-op, internship, research lab experience, or other work-based learning activity including clinicals and student teaching (ORC 3333.64). Proposals that have work-based learning experiences based in or connected to Ohio employers and provide letters of support from those employers may receive priority funding.

e) Programs of Study (25 Points)

Describe and explain the quality of the STEM program(s) at the institution and the extent to which additional resources will enhance their quality, in support of which the institution may describe enrollment and expected labor market demand (ORC 3333.62(A)). Describe and explain how the proposal meets a statewide educational need (ORC 3333.62 (E)).

f) Regional and Statewide Economic Needs and Strengths (20 Points)

Describe and explain how the proposal is integrated with the strengths of the regional economy (ORC 3333.62 (B)), in support of which the institution may reference JobsOhio talent pipeline goals. Please include occupational and industry level information to support the proposal. Data sources should include state and federal data sources for labor supply and demand. Strong evidence may merit additional consideration and result in prioritization of the proposal.



4. Application Excel File

5. Attachments (15 pages maximum):

- a) Institutional support letters. Provide letters of support from each office at the institution that will support the COF program describing the relationship to the COF program. Joint proposals must include letter(s) from all collaborating institutions detailing the commitment to the joint proposal and disclose existing and proposed financial relationships between the parties.
- b) Partner organizations and employer support letters. Include letters of support from each partnering organization (minimum of four) that describe the relationship of the business to the COF program. Letters should be addressed to Chancellor Mike Duffey.

Scoring Rubric

Proposals will be scored on a 100-point scale with the following values:

Project Rationale	10 Points
Recruitment Strategy	10 Points
Student Support	10 Points
Work-based Learning Opportunities	25 Points
Academic Programs	25 Points
Integration with Regional and Statewide Economic Needs	20 Points

Reporting Requirements

The Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) will monitor, which may include site visits and desk audits, each project for which an award is granted to ensure fiscal accountability and progress toward or completion of intended outcomes. Regular reports will be required from all awardees through the Higher Education Information System and other systems. ODHE may request additional documentation up to three years after project completion to review the investments' impacts.

Promotion of Choose Ohio First and Use of Brand Management

All institutions participating in Choose Ohio First are encouraged to use the Choose Ohio First logo and name on recruitment, scholarship information, and websites associated with the Choose Ohio First scholarship.

Legal Notices

The applicant understands that if its application is accepted by the state, the applicant shall enter into an agreement with the state governing the use of the awarded funds. The applicant agrees to comply with all applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations in the conduct of the work hereunder.

The state reserves the right to fund any application in full or in part, to request additional information to assist in the review process, to require new applications from interested parties, to reject any or all applications responding to this announcement, or to reissue the announcement if it is determined that it



is in the best interest of the State of Ohio. Issuing this announcement does not bind the state to making any awards. The state reserves the right to adjust the dates for this announcement for whatever reasons are deemed appropriate. The state reserves the right to waive any non-substantive infractions made by an applicant, provided that the applicant cures such infraction upon request.

All costs incurred in preparation of an application shall be borne by the applicant. Application preparation costs are not recoverable under the award. The State of Ohio shall not contribute in any way to recovering the costs of application preparation.

The funding decisions are final. Applicants will be notified of the outcome of their application(s) at the conclusion of the review process.

The applicant understands that the information provided herein is intended solely to assist the applicant in submittal preparation. To the best of the state's knowledge, the information provided is accurate. However, the state does not warrant such accuracy, and any errors or omissions subsequently determined will not be construed as a basis for invalidating this solicitation. Interested parties bear the sole responsibility of obtaining the necessary information to submit a qualifying application. The state retains the right to modify or withdraw this solicitation at any time. By submitting an application, applicants expressly agree to these terms.

Trade Secrets

All information submitted in response to this RFP become property of ODHE and is public information unless a statutory exception exists that exempts it from public release under the Ohio Public Records Act, as defined in Section 149.43 of the Ohio Revised Code: Respondents are strongly discouraged from including in an application any information that the respondent considers to be a "trade secret," as that term is defined in Section 1333.61(D) of the Ohio Revised Code. The respondent asserting trade secret bears the responsibility to notify ODHE of the trade secret exempt from Ohio public records law, take formal action if necessary, and defend such assertion at its own costs. Otherwise, public records laws may require disclosure.

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