

Community Engaged Dissertation Support Award

Overview

The Division of Community Engagement in the Office of the Provost invites applications for the Community Engaged Dissertation Support Award. The award assists doctoral students whose approved dissertation research includes a meaningful community engagement component.

Doctoral training is an important stage in the development of future scholars and practitioners. It is often during the dissertation that students begin to define their research interests, develop their approach to working with communities, and establish the values that will guide their future scholarship and practice. Community engagement can strengthen the relevance, reciprocity, and potential impact of dissertation research, but students often have limited resources to support this aspect of their work.

This award does not require the entire dissertation to use a fully community-engaged design or to be grounded exclusively in a community engagement framework. The Division recognizes that doctoral students must work within program requirements, dissertation timelines, committee expectations, and the practical scope of a doctoral study.

To qualify, a meaningful component of the approved dissertation must be clearly grounded in a community engagement perspective.

The award also recognizes that community relationships may look different for doctoral students than they do for established researchers. A student may have developed a direct relationship with a community organization or group, or the dissertation may build upon a relationship established by a dissertation chair, committee member, research center, laboratory, or other VCU unit.

By investing in doctoral students at this important stage of their careers, this award seeks to cultivate scholars and practitioners who understand the value of community engagement and are prepared to incorporate it meaningfully into their future research, scholarship, and professional practice.

What This Award Supports

This award supports approved dissertation research in which a meaningful and clearly defined component of the work is grounded in a community engagement perspective.

Research That Does Not Qualify on Its Own

Research conducted in a community (community-based research) or involving community members as research participants is not automatically community-engaged research. Surveys, interviews, focus groups, or other human subjects or qualitative research methods alone do not demonstrate a community engagement approach for the purposes of this funding opportunity.

Purpose

The Community Engaged Dissertation Support Award provides funding to strengthen one or more community-engaged components of approved doctoral dissertation research. Funding may support a community engagement activity related to planning, relationship-building, research implementation, interpretation of findings, dissemination, or another meaningful aspect of the dissertation.

Funding Available

Applicants may request up to \$2,000. Applicants should request only the amount needed to support the proposed community engagement activity. Requests may range from a few hundred to \$2,000, depending on the scope of the activity and the resources required.

Awards are contingent upon the availability of funds. Award funds will be transferred to an appropriate university index identified by the dissertation chair or the student's department. Funds will not be distributed directly to the student.

Eligibility

Applicants must meet the following requirements:

- Be enrolled in a VCU doctoral program and be in good academic standing
- Have advanced to candidacy or reached the equivalent dissertation stage within the program
- Have an approved dissertation proposal
- Demonstrate that community engagement is a meaningful component of the approved conceptual framing or research approach
- Submit a letter of support from the dissertation chair

Students may apply while Institutional Review Board approval is pending. Awards may be approved conditionally, but funding will not be released until all required Institutional Review Board approvals have been received.

Applications will be accepted on a rolling basis. Applicants will generally be notified of a funding decision within four to six weeks following receipt of a complete application.

What Qualifies as Community-Engaged Dissertation Research

- Community stakeholders are involved in shaping the research question or conceptual framing.
- A community partner or community advisory group is involved in shaping the research approach.
- Community stakeholders are involved in decision-making at one or more stages of the research, such as recruitment, implementation, interpretation, or dissemination.
- Community stakeholders are involved in interpreting the research findings and considering what the findings mean within the community context.
- Community stakeholders are involved in planning how findings will be returned to the community in accessible and useful ways.
- The researcher and community stakeholders have a plan to sustain or build upon the community relationship beyond the dissertation.

Applicants should explain which community engagement elements are reflected in the approved dissertation, how they connect to the conceptual framing, and why they are appropriate to the proposed work.

The community relationship may be developed directly by the student or may be part of an existing relationship established through the dissertation chair, committee member, research center, laboratory, or

other VCU unit. Applicants should explain the relationship or engagement context relevant to the work, the student's role, and how the proposed activity reflects a respectful and reciprocal approach.

What Does Not Qualify on Its Own

The following activities, by themselves, do not demonstrate that a dissertation is community-engaged for the purposes of this funding opportunity:

- Recruiting community members as research participants
- Conducting surveys, interviews, focus groups, or other forms of data collection
- Collecting data in a community setting
- Studying a particular community or population
- Using a community organization solely as a recruitment site
- Returning findings to participants without broader community engagement

These activities may be included within community-engaged research, but applicants must demonstrate how community engagement is integrated into the broader conceptual framing, research approach, relationship strategy, interpretation, or dissemination of the dissertation work.

Questions to Consider Before Applying

Applicants should use the following questions to determine whether this funding opportunity is a good fit:

- Is a meaningful component of my approved dissertation grounded in a community engagement perspective or framework?
- Can I identify where community engagement is reflected in the conceptual framing, research approach, community relationship, interpretation of findings, dissemination plan, or another aspect of the dissertation?
- Can I explain how the proposed activity differs from research conducted in a community or involving community members as participants without a broader community engagement approach?
- Is the activity for which I am requesting support clearly connected to the community engagement component of my dissertation?
- Can I explain how community knowledge, perspectives, priorities, relationships, or assets inform this aspect of the work?
- Does the community have a role beyond serving as a source of research participants or data?
- Can I explain how the funding will strengthen the quality, reciprocity, relevance, or community impact of this aspect of my dissertation?
- Do I have a plan to share findings, lessons, or products with the community in an accessible and useful way?
- Does my dissertation committee recognize that the approved dissertation includes a meaningful community engagement component?
- Can I explain how this experience may influence my future work as a scholar, researcher, or practitioner?

Applicants are not expected to answer yes to every question.

Application Requirements

Applications will be submitted through a brief Google Form. The application is intended to be streamlined. Applicants should respond briefly and directly. Most responses should require no more than two or three short paragraphs.

Applicant Information

- I. Name and VCU email address
- II. Doctoral program, school or college, and department
- III. Dissertation title or working title
- IV. Dissertation chair
- V. Dissertation committee members and their departments or affiliations
- VI. Identification of any committee member with community engagement expertise, when applicable
- VII. Date of dissertation proposal approval
- VIII. Institutional Review Board status, when applicable
- IX. Expected dissertation defense date

Dissertation Overview

- Provide a brief overview of the approved dissertation, including the research question and overall approach

Community Engagement Approach

- Explain how community engagement is reflected in the approved conceptual framing or research approach
- Explain how the dissertation differs from research that is conducted in a community or involves human participants without a broader community engagement approach

Community Relationship or Engagement Context

- Describe the community relationship or engagement context relevant to the proposed activity
- Explain whether the relationship was developed directly by the student or is part of an existing relationship established through the dissertation chair, committee member, research center, laboratory, or another VCU unit
- Explain the student role and how the proposed activity reflects respect, reciprocity, and appropriate engagement with the community

Proposed Community Engagement Activity

- Identify the specific community-engaged activity or activities the funding will support

Community Benefit and Dissemination

- Explain how the community may benefit from the work
- Describe how findings, lessons, or products will be shared in an accessible and useful way

Long Term Vision

- Explain how the community engagement approach contributes to the applicant's long-term vision as a scholar, researcher, or practitioner, and how community engagement may continue to inform future work

Budget and Timeline

- State the amount requested
- List each requested expense and briefly explain how it supports the community engagement component of the dissertation

- Provide a timeline for the funded activity and identify when the funds will be used

Required Uploads

Letter of Support from Dissertation Chair

The letter should confirm that the student is in good academic standing, the dissertation proposal has been approved, the approved dissertation includes a meaningful community engagement component, the proposed use of funds is appropriate, and an appropriate university index is available to receive and administer the funds if the application is approved.

Evidence of the Community Engagement Component

Upload only the page or pages from the approved dissertation proposal that provide evidence of the community engagement component. Pages may come from different sections of the proposal and do not need to be consecutive. Relevant pages may come from the conceptual or theoretical framework, background or significance, community engagement approach, methods, or dissemination approach.

Do not upload the entire dissertation proposal. **Upload no more than four pages.**

Optional Supporting Letter

Applicants may include one optional letter from a community partner or another collaborator who can speak to the community-engaged nature of the proposed work. This letter is not required.

Use of Funds

All requested expenses must be reasonable, necessary, and directly connected to the community engagement component of the approved dissertation. Applicants should clearly explain how the requested funds will strengthen the community engagement approach, activity, relationship, interpretation, or dissemination associated with the dissertation.

Funds may not be used for:

- Tuition or student fees
- Personal living expenses
- General computer equipment
- Dissertation editing
- Faculty salary
- Conference registration, conference participation, or conference travel
- Data analysis
- Transcription services
- General research expenses that would be required regardless of the community engagement approach
- Participant incentives that are solely for data collection and have no clear relationship to the community engagement component of the dissertation

Review Process

Applications will be reviewed by a committee with experience in community-engaged research and doctoral education. Applications will be assessed in the following areas:

- I. **Community Engagement Framing:** The extent to which a meaningful component of the approved dissertation is clearly grounded in a community engagement perspective or conceptual framework

- II. **Distinction From Community-Based or Human Subjects Research:** The applicant's ability to explain how the work moves beyond location, participation, or data collection and reflects a broader community engagement approach
- III. **Community Engaged Activity:** The extent to which the proposed activity is clearly connected to the dissertation community engagement framework and strengthens a meaningful community-engaged component of the work
- IV. **Community Relationship or Engagement Context:** The clarity and appropriateness of the community relationship or engagement context, recognizing that doctoral students may build upon relationships established through a chair, committee member, research center, laboratory, or other VCU unit
- V. **Community Benefit and Dissemination:** The extent to which the proposed work supports reciprocity, accessible dissemination, community benefit, or continued engagement
- VI. **Long Term Scholarly or Professional Vision:** The extent to which the applicant explains how the community engagement approach contributes to future work as a scholar, researcher, or practitioner
- VII. **Feasibility:** The likelihood that the proposed activity can be completed within the dissertation timeline and available resources
- VIII. **Budget and Timeline:** The extent to which the request is reasonable, clear, directly connected to the community engagement component, and feasible within the proposed timeline
- IX. **Dissertation Chair Support:** Confirmation that the proposed work is part of the approved dissertation and is supported by the chair

Reviewers will consider the applicant position as a doctoral student and will not expect the same scope of engagement that might be required of an established faculty researcher with extensive resources and infrastructure.

Award Requirements

- Use funds only for approved community-engaged activities
- Complete funded activities before the dissertation defense
- Notify the Division of Community Engagement of the scheduled dissertation defense date
- Submit a brief final report before the dissertation defense

The final report will summarize the completed community-engaged activities, the individuals or organizations engaged, how the award strengthened the dissertation work, lessons learned, how findings or products were shared, challenges encountered, and how the experience contributes to the student's future scholarly or professional work. A final report template will be provided.

Award recipients may also be invited to participate in a panel or discussion about conducting community-engaged dissertation research.