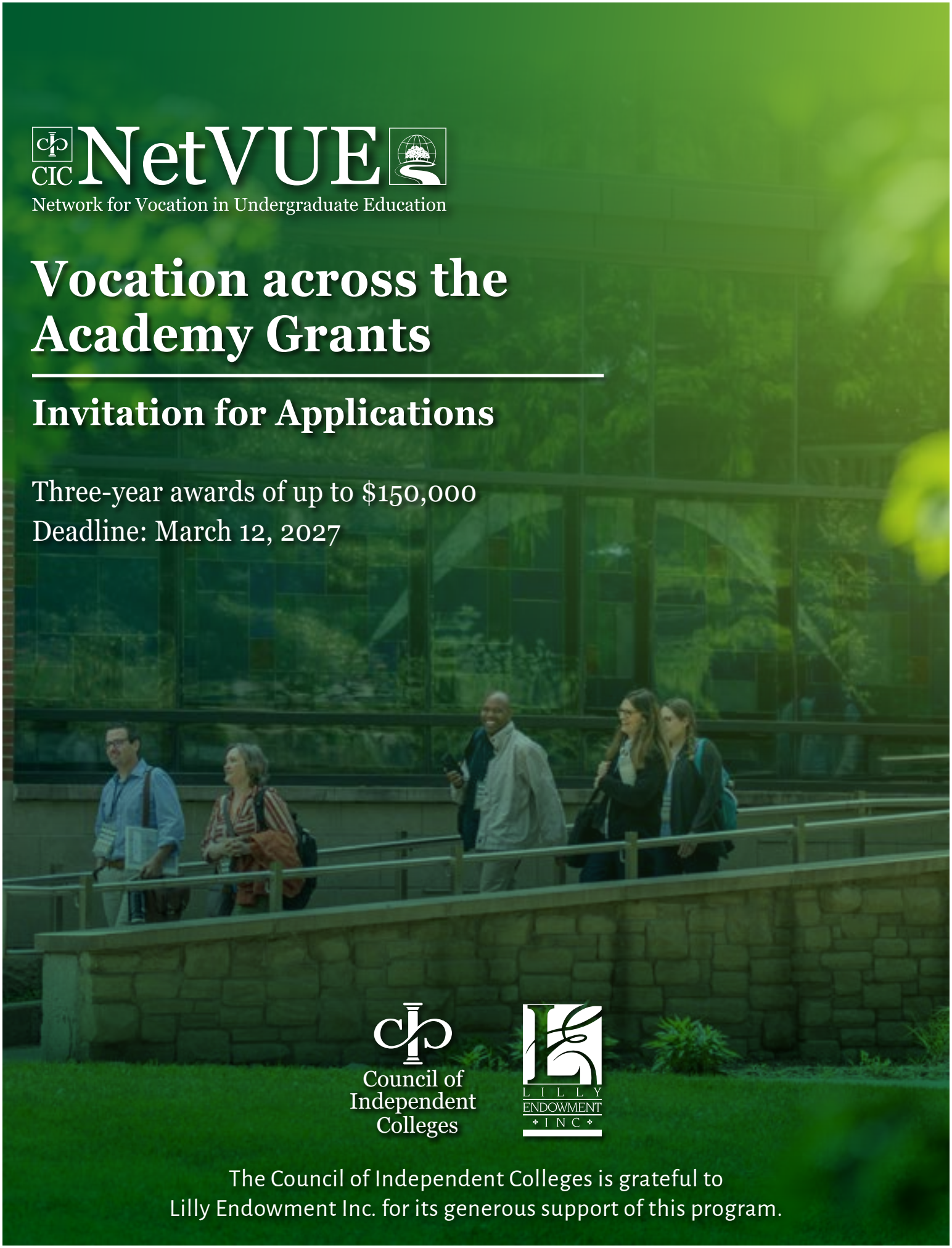

CIC NetVUE
Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education

Vocation across the Academy Grants

Invitation for Applications

Three-year awards of up to $150,000
Deadline: March 12, 2027

Council of Independent Colleges

LILLY ENDOWMENT INC

The Council of Independent Colleges is grateful to Lilly Endowment Inc. for its generous support of this program.

Vocation across the Academy Grants

The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) invites member institutions of its Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE) that meet certain requirements to apply for grants of **up to $130,000** ($150,000 for the special initiative described below) to expand the institution's ongoing vocational exploration and discernment programs. The goal of the grant is to strengthen the institution's capacity for, and to broaden its engagement in, supporting undergraduate students who are discerning their many callings in life.

The Opportunity

One major purpose of a liberal arts education is to help students develop a philosophy of life and a sense of vocation (in its many facets). At the same time, today's undergraduates (and their parents) are rightly preoccupied with postgraduate employment. The purpose of this grant program is to help colleges and universities develop more effective ways to strengthen the links among these important aspects of undergraduate education. It is designed to support institutions in their efforts to expand vocational exploration and discernment programs across the curriculum and co-curricular programs—whether by distributing these programs more evenly across academic disciplines and professional fields, by broadening this work across all four years of the undergraduate experience, or by otherwise expanding the range of students who come into contact with these programs.

The purposes of this grant program are: (a) to help students develop more effective links among their vocational exploration, professional preparation, and emerging philosophies of life; (b) to include more students in activities that promote vocational reflection and discernment; and, in some cases, (c) to build connections between colleges and community partners, such as local businesses, nonprofits, or other civic and cultural organizations in the vicinity, in order to deepen the institution's engagement with the goals of the grant program.

Proposals may focus on upper-level undergraduates, lower-division study, or both. Initiatives that seek to integrate vocational reflection and discernment into the collegiate experience (across a wider range of academic disciplines and professional fields, and/or as a continuum from the first year through the senior year) are especially encouraged. Grant funds may be used for a variety of purposes, but some expenses are ineligible for grant support; for details, grant writers are expected to consult the Grant Budget Guidelines document on the NetVUE website. **Please read these guidelines carefully,** as budget documents that fail to follow these guidelines may lead to the proposal not being entered into the review process.

Examples of programs that show promise for funding through a Vocation across the Academy grant include (but are not limited to):

- Expansion of approaches to vocational reflection that are not limited to a particular profession and are informed by knowledge of likely career trajectories;
- Improved integration of vocational reflection into academic advising throughout the undergraduate years, including support for reflective and effective transitions into college and from college into graduate study or the workforce;

- Efforts that help form the vocational commitments of students—in conversation with significant texts in philosophy, history, literature, and theology, and in ways that prepare them for ethical professional practices;
- Strengthened career services programming through reflective mentoring and partnership with local organizations throughout the undergraduate years; or
- Integration of vocational exploration with experiential learning through academic internships, community-engaged learning, and undergraduate research.

Vocation across the Academy grants will be awarded based on proposals that explain (a) the purpose and goals of the proposed activities and their relationship to the institution's ongoing vocation programs; (b) the extent of institutional support for vocation-related efforts to date; (c) the proposed enhancements this grant would support; (d) the alignment between named objectives and the proposed budget; and (e) the ways that the NetVUE-supported program would be sustained for at least one year beyond the grant period. *Programs consisting mainly of direct financial support for students in the form of internships, scholarships, or stipends will be considered only if these forms of support constitute a relatively small portion of the grant request and only if the institution provides concrete evidence as to how it will sustain this student support beyond the grant period.*

Funding Plan

Vocation across the Academy grants are intended to support projects that last a minimum of four years. Grant funding supports the first three years of the project; however, applications must describe a four-year plan that includes funding exclusively from institutional sources for the fourth year. In the project's first year, grant funding of up to $65,000 will be awarded. Recipients will be asked to raise third-party matching gifts in an amount equal to the initial award by the end of the first year. Upon fulfillment of the matching requirement, the institution will receive a bonus award equal to the initial award amount (up to $65,000), to be used toward project costs in the grant's second and third years. Thus, funding from CIC may be up to $130,000 for the three years of grant-supported work, in addition to funds raised through the donor match; the total funding from all sources could be as much as $195,000.

Examples of allowable expenses include (a) released time for one or more project leaders to coordinate the activities of this grant; (b) mini-grants for instructors to design new courses; (c) workshops or retreats for faculty members and staff members; (d) reading materials and similar resources for use during the grant period; and (e) student events led by campus leaders and/or community partners, including reading materials and refreshments for these events. For examples of allowable expenses, as well as those which are ineligible for grant support, please pay close attention to the Grant Budget Guidelines on the NetVUE website.

The matching requirement is intended to help institutions secure new donors and encourage previous donors to fund new projects. Donors must specifically designate matching gifts to support activities proposed for the project, and matching funds must be received by the end of the first year. Pledges are not sufficient, nor may previously received gifts be repurposed to count toward the third-party match. Funds awarded by other granting entities cannot be counted toward the match. While the development of donor commitments may help institutions sustain programs into the future, the funding designated for the match must be expended during years two and three of the grant; institutions must use existing funds (or donor funds raised beyond the matching requirement) in budgeting for the fourth year.

CIC recognizes that the requirement to raise donor funds of this amount constitutes a greater challenge for some NetVUE member institutions than for others. Three provisions are offered in response to this reality:

- Institutions that raise a smaller amount of donor funding will receive a bonus award of that smaller amount (in other words, the match is not an all-or-nothing affair).
- Institutions that receive this smaller first-year bonus award may continue to raise funds; if additional amounts are raised by the end of the second year, those funds will be matched at that time (with the total bonus not to exceed the original grant amount).
- Applying institutions are invited (though not required) to provide a data-driven argument to be considered for a partial matching requirement that will still enable them to receive the full amount of the bonus award.

With respect to the last of these provisions: the option of applying for a reduction in the matching requirement is intended for institutions that primarily serve underrepresented or high-need student populations. Such institutions are encouraged to provide information such as the percentage of Pell-eligible and/or first-generation students currently enrolled, the demographic and/or socio-economic contours of the student body, endowment per student, and any other information that would help evaluators consider a reduced donor matching requirement. This information should be included with the original grant proposal, so that CIC can budget future years accordingly. For proposals that are funded, the award letter will specify any reduction in the donor match requirement. This decision will be based on each institution's case for a reduced donor match, the number of applications requesting a reduced match in a given year, and funds available for providing additional support. In no case, however, will the donor matching requirement be reduced to less than 50% of the first-year award. Institutions that expect to find the fundraising requirement challenging could also consider applying for less than the maximum $65,000 initial award.

Special Initiative:
Vocation across the Academy Community Partnerships

CIC will award additional Vocation across the Academy grants, at a higher level of funding, for proposals that focus on building partnerships within the local community. Vocation across the Academy grants with this focus have the same eligibility rules and application procedures, but may be requested for amounts up to $75,000, with an expectation of a donor match and a potential bonus award of the same amount, for a total of up to $225,000 in CIC and third-party funding. The same provisions listed above—those designed to address the concerns of institutions that would find completing the entire donor match challenging—are also available for institutions that apply under this special initiative.

This additional opportunity is designed to help colleges and universities develop partnerships with local businesses, nonprofits, and civic and cultural organizations that will strengthen the links among students' vocational discernment, career preparation, and philosophies of life. These partnerships should be designed to help students consider the larger community context within which they hope to live out their callings—not only in terms of career and professional preparation, but also with respect to issues of meaning, purpose, and identity.

Note: Applications for the special initiative should demonstrate clear alignment between programming related to the special initiative and the budget outlining proposed expenses.

Proposals may focus on first-year or upper-division students (or both). They may build relationships with partner organizations through academic departments, campus ministry, career services, or other relevant campus offices. Proposals that foster collaboration among offices within the university in support of these community partnerships are especially encouraged.

Eligibility and Funding Timeline

NetVUE member colleges and universities are eligible to apply for funding **if they have been awarded at least one previous NetVUE grant.** However, institutions are not eligible if— at the time of application—they hold (or have already been awarded and are about to hold) a NetVUE Professional Development Award, Program Development Grant, or Campuswide Innovation in Vocation Award. *(In rare cases for NetVUE's institutions with a recent history of successful grant project completion, it is possible to end a Program Development Grant early in order to apply for a Vocation across the Academy Grant. Please contact Carter Aikin at caikin@cic.edu to learn of qualifying conditions and additional expectations for institutions seeking this exception.)*

If the member has held a previous Vocation across the Academy Grant, two additional eligibility conditions apply: that grant must have been completed by June 30, 2024, and the application must include a detailed description of how the project supported by the previous grant is being sustained. **Note:** if an institution currently holds a grant for Fostering Leadership for Communities of Faith and/or for Reframing the Institutional Saga, it is eligible to apply for this grant; however, the proposal must show that staffing and other resources are adequately distributed to allow projects to succeed. Ordinarily, this will require that the projects be directed by distinct leadership teams.

Eligible institutions that hold (or are preparing to hold) a grant through the Educating Character Initiative must provide a statement explaining how that project and the proposed NetVUE Program Development Grant will complement and align with one another. The proposal must also show how staffing, leadership, and other needs will be apportioned to allow both projects to reach their respective goals successfully, if both projects are awarded.

This is the ninth round of Vocation across the Academy grants; in the previous eight rounds, CIC awarded grants to 99 NetVUE member institutions. The application deadline for this round is **March 12, 2027**. Decisions will be announced in June 2027. Funds will be released in July 2027 for use over a three-year period (July 15, 2027, through June 29, 2030). An interim report and documentation of receipt of matching funds is due by May 31, 2028; after approval, matching grant funds will be released. All spending from grant and donor funds must be completed by June 29, 2030.

Expectations of Grant Recipients

If awarded a NetVUE Vocation across the Academy Grant, the institution will agree to:

- ☐ Submit to CIC written annual progress and budget reports, the first of which is due May 31, 2028. This report must include documentation of matching funds received during the grant's first year (following the guidelines provided with the grant agreement form). A second interim report is due by June 11, 2029, which may include documentation of additional funds raised toward the maximum total match;

- ▢ Participate in efforts by CIC and NetVUE to assess, coach, and advise grant-funded activities, including (but not limited to) participation in surveys, virtual focus groups, and virtual gatherings of grant directors;
- ▢ Provide final narrative and financial reports to CIC by August 30, 2030, describing the outcome of the project and reflecting on the effectiveness of its initiatives;
- ▢ Submit a final narrative report on the project's fourth year of institutionally supported activities, including a description of future plans for the project, by July 31, 2031;
- ▢ Permit the inclusion of news about its project in CIC and NetVUE publications;
- ▢ Compose and disseminate several "stories of success" arising from grant-supported activities, as described elsewhere in this document, to be shared with internal and external constituencies (and provided to NetVUE as a one-page summary for posting on its website);
- ▢ Identify the funded activities as supported by the Council of Independent Colleges and Lilly Endowment Inc. in all project materials and publicity;
- ▢ Maintain membership in NetVUE throughout the full four years of the project; and
- ▢ Send a campus team headed by the president or an officer at the vice-presidential level to the 2028 and 2030 NetVUE Conferences. (Three-person teams pay only a nominal registration fee; costs for accommodation and meals are waived.)

Application Guidelines

Proposals should be submitted online as a single document and consist of the following components. Please use a **12-point font** and standard **.75-inch margins** for legibility.

- ▢ **A Project Title**
- ▢ **A One Page (maximum) Executive Summary of the Proposal**
- ▢ **A Public Description** of 100 to 120 words for public dissemination. If funded, this text will be utilized on the NetVUE website. This paragraph should describe the proposed program in a way that is understandable by those unfamiliar with your institution, and it should clearly articulate what the program will do (rather than why funding is needed). Descriptions should use third-person, objective language (rather than describing what "we" will do), but avoid program names particular to the institution, opting instead for a description of their function (e.g., "a student mentoring program" rather than "The Pathways Program"). The description should make clear what the long-term impact of this project will be, particularly regarding the vocational exploration of undergraduates.
- ▢ **A Four- to Five-Page Narrative** that provides, *in this order and in clearly marked sections:*
    - A brief description of the institution's understanding of vocation as it relates to its campus mission and how this understanding guides its current programs;
    - An indication of what the institution has learned from previous NetVUE grants and ongoing grant projects, keeping in mind that external reviewers will not be aware of previous vocation-related activities on campus.

- A description of both the challenges and the opportunities that the grant would address in the institution's program for vocational exploration;
- For proposals submitted under the Community Partnership initiative, a description of the challenges and the opportunities that the grant would address in developing partnerships with local businesses, nonprofits, and/or cultural organizations, and how these partnerships might foster vocational reflection and discernment among students (note: budgets for projects submitted under the Community Partnership initiative should include funds allocated specifically toward advancing the goals specific to this initiative);
- A statement of project goals that can be referenced and assessed both during and at the end of the grant period to evaluate project success, along with a description of indicators that would demonstrate that these goals have been met;
- A detailed description of proposed activities during the grant period (note: this should be the largest section of the narrative);
- A description of the institution's strategy for encouraging program participation among students across demographic and socio-economic categories, ensuring that all students can participate in vocational exploration programs;
- A description of how the institution plans to share its "stories of success" (as described elsewhere in this document) with its internal and external constituencies, and with NetVUE;
- A robust plan for assessment and evaluation of the project, both during and following its implementation (as conducted by individuals external to the project and, if at all possible, external to the institution), describing the assessment instruments and benchmarks that will be used to evaluate the degree to which each program element met its stated goals;
- A description of the institution's strategy for raising the donor match, with evidence of conversations with the institution's president and chief advancement officer; and
- A statement of how the institution will continue the enhanced vocation initiative during the project's fourth year, after the three-year funding period has concluded.

☐ **A One-Page Project Timeline**

☐ **A One-Page Roster** that lists the names and contact information for (a) the principal project contact (the person leading grant-funded activities, not the institution's grants administrator); (b) the senior (cabinet-level) administrator who will oversee the project; (c) the project's leaders, including short descriptions of their qualifications for the specified roles; (d) the advancement officer who will work with project leaders to raise the required matching funds; and (e) any other individuals who will help carry out the project, including a one-sentence description of each person's role. If the NetVUE campus contact is not already a member of the leadership roster, please list them at the bottom of the leadership roster with a note indicating that the campus contact is aware of this grant application and has been involved in the conversations leading up to this application. (Please reach out to Jane Walters, NetVUE Grants and Membership Manager, at jwalters@cic.edu if you need help identifying your campus contact.) **Note:** Institutions that currently hold a NetVUE Grant for Reframing the Institutional Saga and/or a Grant for Fostering Leadership for Communities of Faith should include, at the end of this roster, a clear explanation of how staffing responsibilities and other resources would be distributed in ways that would allow all NetVUE-funded projects (whether new or ongoing) to succeed.

- ▢ **A Concise Budget and Budget Narrative** for all four project years, to include allocation of all grant and matching funds during the three-year grant period as well as institutional funds to be used in support of the project over its four-year span. Budgets should list the expense categories for each year of the project separately, including programmatic expenses, staff and faculty member stipends or released time, honoraria for speakers and/or writers, meals and travel for meetings, and costs of materials and supplies. *Budgets should clearly distinguish grant funds, matching funds, and institutional contributions in each line item.* Applicants are expected to follow rigorously the rules about eligible expenses and the construction of the budget, as explained in the **Grant Budget Guidelines** document on the NetVUE website. This important document provides answers to frequently asked questions and a sample budget; please study it carefully in the construction of the budget.

Please Note: Budgets must include support for robust assessment efforts (led by someone outside the leadership roster), yielding a written report that tracks and explains progress on specific expected outcomes. Budgets must also include support for the project leader(s), preferably through buyouts of time—i.e., funding other employees (adjunct instructors or college staff members) to perform the project leaders' contracted duties—to ensure that leaders have adequate time and space to bring the grant-funded project to fruition. **Budgets should not allocate fractional time of any employee's work without a clear description of who will take up that percentage of duties and how that person will be compensated.**

- ▢ **A Letter of Support** from the president indicating the institution's commitment to sustain the activities that would be supported with a NetVUE grant during and after the project period and designating a member of the president's cabinet to oversee this project. If a course release or time buy-out in support of program leadership is included in this proposal and its budget, the letter of support should articulate the institution's commitment to the reallocation of relevant duties, should the grant be awarded. The letter also should affirm the institution's commitment to continue NetVUE membership throughout the four-year project and to send a campus team headed by the president or an officer at the vice-presidential level to the 2028 and 2030 NetVUE Conferences.

Telling Stories of Success

CIC is confident that NetVUE member institutions receiving these grants will achieve meaningful and lasting outcomes, increasing their level of support for undergraduate students—as well as for members of the faculty and staff who guide them—in the complex work of vocational exploration and discernment. In order to ensure that these positive outcomes become more widely known, grant recipients are asked to craft a plan for sharing stories of success from grant-supported programming, with attention to two key audiences: (a) constituencies internal to the institution (beyond those already participating in grant-supported activities) and (b) constituencies external to the institution (in ways that go beyond general promotion, marketing, and/or cultivation of donors). A brief description of this "storytelling" plan should be included in the grant proposal, as noted elsewhere in this document. The purpose of this requirement is to ensure that the valuable achievements of this grant-supported effort extend beyond traditional campus silos, reaching a broader audience of current students, staff, and faculty members (as well as constituencies outside the institution).

Some suggestions for effectively fulfilling this requirement will be provided after the grant is awarded; however, applicants are encouraged to think creatively (when constructing the proposal) as to how this requirement might be met. This will put them in a better position to develop and disseminate stories of success when the grant period concludes. By making plans now as to how they will tell the story of their grant-funded projects, grantees will be better prepared to highlight the accomplishments of their work—helping to inform not only the entire campus, but also the wider community, about their unfolding work.

Application Deadline

The application deadline is **March 12, 2027**. Proposals and supporting materials should be submitted electronically as a single document via the portal on the NetVUE website. Proposals can be considered only if they are submitted through this system.

Questions?

Questions about NetVUE Vocation across the Academy Grants (including the Community Partnership initiative) should be addressed to Carter Aikin, NetVUE grants director, at *caikin@cic.edu* or (217) 854-5619.