



Request for Proposals: Development of Student-Centered, Anti-Oppressive Employability Skills Framework

Submissions due: October 7, 2022

I. Introduction

The Opportunity Network (OppNet) is working to create a first-of-its-kind employability framework and aligned measure tool that consists of human-centric (AI-proof), cross-sector, in-demand employability skills, and students' individual and collective employability assets. In this ~year-long project, OppNet will engage a research practitioner who can take the framework OppNet has already developed and elevate it to integrate additional employability assets unique to and/or prevalent in first-generation communities of color that are known to correlate with career readiness and/or workforce entry and advancement. These employability assets will be gathered through primary research with young people of color in OppNet's community. OppNet is looking for a partner who can lead and perform this work.

II. Organization's History

Since 2003, OppNet has ignited the drive, curiosity, and agency of historically and systematically underrepresented students on their paths to and through college and into thriving careers, powered by our commitment to access and community. This year, OppNet will reach more than 10,000 students of color across the nation to support them in achieving their college and career goals.

- OppNet's founding Fellows Program is a direct-service, six- to eight-year program that works with 1,000+ students from the summer before 11th grade through to college graduation, providing college guidance and supports, five summers of paid internships, career exposure and skills training, and support in growing personal and professional networks.
- OppNet's Career Fluency® Partnerships is a community capacity-building program that works with schools, youth-serving nonprofits, and corporations across 20+ cities to build their capacity to amplify college and career outcomes for their own students.
- Through Opportunity Ignited, we provide advisory services to corporations seeking to embed values of diversity, equity, and inclusion in their businesses.

All of the work OppNet leads is in service of realizing our vision of a nation connected through vibrant communities and networks actively in pursuit of social justice and educational equity – a nation where all young people can freely create their own path to enduring success that honors their passions, ambitions, and full

identities.

III. Project Goals

This project will address the following institutional and field-wide needs and goals:

- OppNet (and the career development field at large) has no systematic, standardized, longitudinal method for identifying young people's employability assets at baseline (program entry), at regular intervals throughout the program, and at program completion.
- The field at large has historically been unable to create a framework for employability that honors both the needs of employers and the unique employability assets of young first-generation college-going people of color.
- To date, OppNet has used imperfect proxies to assess its Fellows program's ultimate outcome: students secure a post-graduate opportunity in their field of interest that matches their talents, passions, and ambitions. OppNet seeks a tool that will enable staff and students to evaluate this multi-layered outcome with improved validity.
- OppNet (and the field) needs to increase the student-centeredness and asset-based orientation of its career guidance and exposure work. A detailed framework (resulting from this project), which Fellows will use to articulate and evaluate their "employability"/career readiness, and, when used in combination with OppNet's existing tools, which source students' professional goals, will:
 - Equip OppNet's Career Success staff with highly nuanced information about a student's employability assets, which may be used to recruit internship partners and match students with 'best fit' summer internships;
 - Enrich students' understanding of their own employability assets; and
 - Equip students with the language they may use to convey their employability assets to prospective employers with clarity and specificity.

IV. Project's Requirements

For this next stage of investment in our Employability Framework project, the practitioner that OppNet engages will take the framework OppNet has already developed (see Section VIII) and elevate it to integrate additional employability assets gathered through primary research with young people of color in OppNet's community. This partner will engage Fellows, Fellows alumni, and Partner students through focus groups, interviews, workshops, surveys, or similar methods to surface competencies unique to and/or prevalent in first-generation communities of color that are known to correlate with career readiness and/or workforce entry and advancement.

- Project Timeline, Activities, and Deliverables
 - [Nov 7, 2022 - Jan 3, 2023] Research strategy (2 mos) [**Deliverable 1 due Jan 3, 2023**]
 - Researcher reviews existing employability framework + measure item drafts through a critical race and gender lens.
 - Researcher develops a detailed research strategy (design, method(s), sampling, etc.) for collecting primary data from Fellows, Fellows alumni, and select Partner students

which will advance OppNet's vision for the project.

- [Jan 3, 2023 - Jan 13, 2023] Deliverable 1 Review Period
 - [Jan 16, 2023 - Mar 17, 2023] Develop data collection tool(s) (2 mos) [**Deliverable 2 due Mar 17, 2023**]
 1. Researcher develops and tests tool(s) (i.e., interview/focus group protocol(s), survey(s), etc.) that will be used to collect primary data from Fellows, Fellows alumni, and select Partner students.
- Deliverable 2 Review Period: Mar 20, 2023 - Mar 31, 2023
- Administer data collection tool: Apr 3, 2023 - Apr 28, 2023 (1 mo)
 - Researcher administers the data collection tool (i.e., conducts interviews/focus groups, administers survey(s), etc.) with/to a sample of Fellows, Fellows alumni, and select Partner students.
- Analysis: May 1, 2023 - May 31, 2023 (1 mo)
 - Researcher analyzes primary data using descriptive methods, content/thematic analysis, and other relevant methods required by the research strategy.
 - Researcher provides transcription of interview/focus group data (if applicable) (closed caption capture will suffice).
- Draft report + draft revised employability framework: Jun 1, 2023 - Sep 15, 2023 (2-3 mos) [**Deliverable 3 due Sep 15, 2023**]
 - Researcher develops a draft report summarizing research methods, sample(s), and findings.
 - Researcher integrates Fellows, Fellows alumni, and select Partner students' input and insights into the employability framework.
 - Researcher applies a critical lens to ensure that all employability assets included in the framework (and how these assets are defined) align with OppNet's asset-based, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive values.
 - Researcher supports OppNet to distribute the framework draft to a small sample of Fellows, Fellows alumni, select Partner students, and OppNet staff so that they can review and provide feedback. [Recommended timeframe: Jul 10 - Aug 18, as many staff are heavily involved in summer programming and/or take PTO].
- Deliverable 3 Review Period: Sep 18, 2023 - Sep 29, 2023
- Final report + final employability framework: Oct 2, 2023 - Oct 31, 2023 (1 mo) [**Final deliverables (#4) due Oct 31, 2023**]
 - Researcher submits final report summarizing research methods, sample, and findings.
 - Researcher finalizes employability framework.
- Sample source; population
 - Sample source will be provided by OppNet. Population includes first-generation college-going young people of color served by OppNet: current Fellows, alumni of the Fellows Program, and students served by Partner organizations ("Partner students").

- Sample size
 - To be determined in partnership with OppNet and selected research practitioner.

- Geographic scope
 - The six-year Fellows Program serves students who attend or graduated from New York City public high schools. Many of these students go on to attend colleges and universities across the United States. Similarly, many Partner organizations serve NYC-based students; however, we have Partners in 14+ US states and 20+ cities. Given the geographical spread of young people in our community, we are open to in-person and/or virtual activities in pursuit of our project goals. If in-person activities would best achieve our project's goals, then those activities would take place in NYC.

- Language(s)
 - English.

- Project Budget
 - Up to \$175,000 for selected research practitioner.
 - Up to \$40,000 for student compensation for their participation in this project.

V. Proposal Guidelines

- Please submit proposals to Katherine Hanson, Associate Director of Decision Science, at <katherine@opportunitynetwork.org> on or before October 7, 2022.

- Proposal Package (no longer than 12 pages in length, 10-point font):
 - Cover Page (1 page), with name of research entity, contact information (phone, email, website (if applicable)), and date of submission;

 - Executive summary (½ page in length, 10-point font);

 - Proposal (no longer than 10 pages in length (10-point font); must include the following:
 - Statement of your/your organization's competency to complete the work required in alignment with OppNet's core values, including descriptions of relevant experience;
 - Proposal for the methodology best suited for the work required of this project, bearing OppNet's core values in mind;
 - Proposed outline and sequence for the specific work activities to align with the deliverable schedule outlined above;
 - Team structure and organization of work: describe the proposed team and the roles they will play on this project, and include the CV(s) of each person proposed to staff this project;
 - Detailed fee proposal, with justification; and
 - Professional/research references, minimum of 2, with short description of reference relevance. We'd prefer to speak with references who can speak to the researcher(s)' equity-focused work.

- Breakdown of your organization's board and staff by race and gender, as well as the specific team that will be focusing on this body of work. Preference will be given to organizations committed to the inclusion and career development of women, as well as racial and ethnic minority researchers (~½ page in length, 10-pt font).

VI. Evaluation of Alignment with Project Goals and Equity Orientation

In addition to developing a compelling proposal for the work, applicants should bring the following assets to this project:

- Experience conducting comprehensive primary research in the form of interviews, focus groups, and surveying with young first-generation people of color from historically underrepresented communities;
 - Experience in youth participatory methods preferred
- Experience working in partnership with non-profit organizations to design and implement research;
- Demonstrated commitment to anti-oppressive/anti-racist research methods and practices;
 - Explicit experience in this arena preferred;
- Alignment with [OppNet's core values](#) in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

VII. Selection Timeline:

- RFP release: August 24, 2022
- Open question period: August 24, 2022 - September 23, 2022
 - Email questions to Katherine Hanson, Associate Director of Decision Science, at <katherine@opportunitynetwork.org>
 - Access a running document with Frequently Answered Questions [here](#). Document will be updated three times/week.
- Proposal submission deadline: October 7, 2022
- Proposal review period, including calls with aligned candidates: October 10, 2022 - October 28, 2022
- Candidate selection and announcement: November 4, 2022
- Project start date: November 7, 2022
- Project end date: October 31, 2023

VIII. Additional Project Context and Work Done to Date

To address the needs outlined above, OppNet contracted an independent evaluation team in academic year 2017-

18. As part of a larger scope of work, which includes an in-progress longitudinal evaluation of OppNet's flagship Fellows Program, this research team conducted robust secondary research to surface career readiness and employability frameworks in use by other workforce development organizations (e.g., National Association of Colleges and Employers, National Network of Business and Industry Associations). Additionally, they reviewed peer-reviewed articles and already-published survey instruments with attention to skills/behaviors proven by employers to be associated with employability and career readiness. The research team also conducted secondary research to surface employability assets unique to and/or prevalent in underrepresented, first-generation college-going communities of color. Ultimately, this research team produced a framework that synthesizes from these myriad sources valid, reliable, and timely indicators of employability.

Once the employability framework draft was finalized, OppNet circulated the draft to leaders across the organization with expertise in youth development, cultural capital, and critical consciousness. These stakeholders were asked to review the draft with attention to:

- Program-Impacted Skills and Behaviors: Narrowing the framework's focus to the employability skills & behaviors that students develop through their participation in OppNet's programming, and
- Equity: Assessing how OppNet's students, who are first-generation young people of color from underrepresented communities, are affected by this framework in its current form, with an eye toward assessing who holds the most power in this dynamic, and who benefits.

OppNet emerged from this round of internal circulation and feedback with clarity on the array of employability assets that will be the framework's focus. Our review also revealed that this framework, itself a synthesis of many frameworks, perpetuates some of the challenges inherent to all such frameworks that center employers:

- These frameworks were created by employers and higher education administrators. For example, "Competencies for a Career Ready Workforce", a well-known employability framework from NACE, was created by [a task force made up of NACE members from university-level career services and talent recruiters](#). These professionals offer valuable insight into many (though not all) of the skills important to career success. However, because young professionals were not incorporated into the construction of these frameworks, the frameworks likely omit competencies unique to or prevalent in this talent.
- Furthermore, because the racial/ethnic makeup of these framework creators are unknown, we cannot know the extent to which the employability assets of first-generation talent of color in particular are disproportionately underrepresented and/or omitted.

Our internal review drove us to expand our investment in this project in order to create an employability framework that achieves our programmatic and operational goals *and* is equitable and inclusive of the employability assets of first-generation talent of color.

This additional work that OppNet is seeking to accomplish with our to-be-engaged equity-focused research practitioner will bring this employability framework into alignment with these aims. OppNet's previously-engaged research team will then utilize the elevated framework to develop and implement the above-mentioned employability measure tool.