



National Initiative to Strengthen Chaplaincies at Colleges and Universities

REQUEST FOR CONCEPT PAPERS

2026

Lilly Endowment is pleased to announce its National Initiative to Strengthen Chaplaincies at Colleges and Universities (Chaplaincy Initiative). The aim of the initiative is to strengthen the capacities of collegiate ministries throughout the United States to nurture the religious lives of college students both today and into the future.

In this competitive initiative, the Endowment intends to award grants of **up to \$2.5 million each to approximately 60 accredited, four-year colleges and universities in the United States with chaplaincies or offices of religious life** to support programs that will advance the aim stated above and the following five objectives:

1. Assisting chaplains, mission officers and/or spiritual leaders from the school's office of religious life in listening to and understanding more deeply the emerging spiritual interests and questions of students and in assessing how effectively their existing ministry strategies and programs are reaching and nurturing the religious lives of young people.
2. Supporting the president and other senior administrators and faculty in exploring and clarifying with chaplains, mission officers and other campus spiritual leaders the roles that chaplaincies and/or offices of religious life play in nurturing the religious lives of students, in maintaining connections with the school's historic religious tradition (if applicable), in fostering relationships with local churches and faith communities and in advancing the school's mission.
3. Creating new and/or enhancing existing programs to help students explore their spiritual interests and questions, build community with other students, discover and test how they can draw more fully on their faith as they make decisions about their futures and engage in religious practices and rituals to deepen their faith.
4. Fostering more opportunities for students to serve as leaders and explore calls to ministry and other forms of religious leadership.
5. Engaging in related activities to build and strengthen the organizational and financial capacities of chaplaincies and/or offices of religious life to enhance their ministries and sustain them long term.

Through the Chaplaincy Initiative, the Endowment anticipates awarding grants **totaling up to \$150 million** to selected colleges and universities.

Interested colleges and universities may apply for Chaplaincy Initiative grants through a two-stage, competitive process:

Stage 1 Concept Papers: In the first stage, colleges and universities may submit concept papers that explain their interest in the initiative and provide initial descriptions of the potential programs for which they would like to request an implementation grant. Concept papers must be submitted through the Chaplaincy Initiative Concept Paper Submission Form, which may be found on the initiative's webpage. **Concept papers are due by January 11, 2027.**

The Endowment will review the concept papers and invite **up to 120 schools** that submit program concepts that show the most promise to advance the Chaplaincy Initiative's aim and objectives to develop their concepts and submit implementation proposals. *The Endowment anticipates inviting schools to the second stage in March 2027.*

Stage 2 Implementation Grant Proposals: In the second stage, which is also competitive, selected colleges and universities may submit proposals for grants of **up to \$2.5 million each** that may be used for up to a five-year period to implement their programs. As noted above, the Endowment intends to award implementation grants to **approximately 60 colleges and universities** that submit the most promising and compelling proposals.

Implementation grant proposals are due by June 1, 2027. *The Endowment anticipates announcing implementation grant awards in fall 2027.*

More information about the background, eligibility, design considerations, selection criteria and concept paper guidelines is provided below. The Endowment will send at a later date proposal guidelines to schools invited to move into the initiative's second stage.

Background

The Spiritual Interests of College Students

Many young people experience college as one of the most deeply formative periods in their lives. During the college years, students often explore and develop further important aspects of their identity. They form dreams, find mentors, explore career options, cultivate significant relationships and learn job skills. College also is a critical time for students to reflect on, explore and sometimes even rebuild earlier understandings of their faith, claim their faith and values as their own and learn how to draw on their faith commitments as they make decisions about their futures. For some students who may not have any religious background, college may be a time to explore spiritual questions about their faith for the first time. For others, their spiritual interests and faith commitments may take on more meaning and depth when they are away from their homes for an extended period of time. In both cases, the ministries supported through college chaplaincies and campus ministries provide formative experiences through which students can explore and integrate faith more purposefully into their daily lives.

Many college and university presidents, deans, mission officers, faculty, chaplains and campus pastors have shared with Lilly Endowment that their campuses are experiencing a significant increase in the number of students who attend worship services and participate in bible studies and related religious activities. This surge in interest and participation has generated a national debate about whether a religious "revival" is occurring today among young people. While the jury is still out on this debate, college chaplains and campus pastors report that greater numbers of students are seeking places to ask questions of meaning and purpose, to explore spiritual curiosities and to connect with something larger than themselves. They also note that many of these students have little knowledge about religious traditions. In response, many chaplains and campus pastors need not only to expand their religious activities but also to reorganize and adapt their programs to provide students with basic understandings of sacred texts and to teach them devotional practices and worship rituals that nourish and deepen their faith.

College chaplains and campus pastors report that, beyond having a desire for worship and a search for purpose and meaning, an increasing number of students are participating in religious life because they are looking for a “home away from home” on campus. Commentators of higher education have noted the increased pressures and uncertainties faced by students today. There are increasing mental health challenges and a widespread sense of loneliness and isolation alongside the normal developmental stage of learning to balance academic demands, work and social life on their own. Recent studies have found that many students are looking for community and one of their highest motivations for participating in religious life is to find a place where they belong. In response, chaplains and campus pastors note that they are spending greater amounts of time on building community among young people.

Challenges Faced by College Chaplaincies and Campus Ministries

Several studies, including the Endowment-funded Landscape Study of Chaplaincy and Campus Ministry, which was conducted by John Schmalzbauer at Missouri State University, have documented challenges facing college chaplaincies and campus ministries today. One challenge is that job responsibilities placed on college chaplains and campus pastors are expanding. While chaplains and campus pastors continue to guide religious activities (e.g., leading worship services, teaching sacred texts, providing mentoring and spiritual direction, organizing fellowship events), they report that they are increasingly asked to support campus efforts focused on fostering the mental health of students, to help address campus conflicts generated by increasing polarization and to raise funds to support and sustain their ministries.

Another challenge is responding to the increasing diversity of campus life. Reflecting broader American culture, most colleges and universities (even those historically or closely affiliated with specific Christian denominations) are enrolling students from a broad spectrum of religious communities, including Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other traditions. College chaplains and campus pastors report that students are seeking to deepen their own faith, but they also are curious about and interested in learning about other religious traditions. As a result, ministries on campuses need to attend more intentionally to interreligious engagement than in the past.

A third challenge is financial. The economic uncertainties and financial stress experienced by higher education institutions have resulted in an unevenness and diminishment of resources flowing to collegiate ministries. As a result, many college chaplains and campus pastors are now being asked to expand their ministries to meet increasing student interest with fewer resources.

The Chaplaincy Initiative seeks to support colleges and universities in addressing these and other related challenges.

Cultivating a New Generation of Leaders for Religious Communities

Many Christian pastors, as well as leaders in other faith traditions, often describe the college years as a pivotal time for them in discerning callings to religious leadership. Their involvement in religious activities offered through chaplaincies provided them with important opportunities to organize bible studies for their peers, lead student worship services and engage in other activities to discover and hone their spiritual and leadership gifts. Through the chaplaincies, they also were connected to local churches and faith-based organizations and participated in internships and other leadership experiences that enabled them to work side-by-side with mentors and to test calls to the ministry.

Through the Chaplaincy Initiative, the Endowment seeks to encourage and support collegiate ministries in strengthening their efforts to cultivate a new generation of thoughtful religious leaders for church and society. In an increasingly complex society, the need is great for a new generation of leaders with moral and spiritual grounding who can connect their deeply held faith convictions to their analysis of contemporary challenges and lead religious and faith-based organizations with vision and creativity. Recognizing the religiously pluralistic character of campus life today, the Endowment is especially interested in supporting efforts that assist students in testing calls to Christian leadership, while also providing hospitality and support to students from a broad spectrum of religious communities who are interested in developing leadership gifts to contribute to the vitality of their own communities.

Complementary Efforts

The Chaplaincy Initiative is intended to complement other Endowment-supported efforts focused on deepening the religious lives of students and strengthening faith-based higher education. Founded in 2009, the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE), which is based at the Council of Independent Colleges, is a membership network comprising nearly 350 colleges and universities from across the United States. Member schools exchange knowledge and insights about how best to support students as they draw on their faith traditions, as well as ethical and philosophical traditions, to discern their varied callings and explore how to lead lives of meaning and purpose. Established in 1991, the Lilly Network of Church-Related Colleges and Universities (Lilly Network) is a membership network of 110 colleges and universities that seeks to strengthen the quality and character of church-related higher education. Through conferences, fellowships and other related activities, this network helps church-related colleges and universities sharpen their missions and identities and cultivates and supports the leadership for these schools.

Together, NetVUE and the Lilly Network, as well as other related Endowment-supported programs, work to increase the capacity of colleges and universities to help students discover and pursue meaningful lives motivated by faith. The Chaplaincy Initiative builds directly on these efforts by seeking to help colleges and universities enhance the quality of religious life on their campuses.

Eligibility

Accredited, four-year colleges and universities in the United States that are tax-exempt public charities under Internal Revenue Code section 501(c)(3) and corresponding statutes and that have chaplaincies and/or offices of religious life are eligible to submit **concept papers** in the first stage of the Chaplaincy Initiative.

The Endowment seeks to support eligible colleges and universities that have historic or current relationships with a broad spectrum of religious communities and traditions and that demonstrate the capacity, readiness and commitment to develop and implement high-quality programs that advance the aim and objectives of the initiative.

The concept papers should provide descriptions of potential Chaplaincy Initiative programs that would require grants of **up to \$2.5 million** that may be used for up to a five-year period to develop and execute. Colleges and universities should state in their concept papers the anticipated amount of funding needed to implement their programs.

Eligible colleges and universities may submit concept papers for smaller programs that would not require the maximum amount of implementation grant funding and are more appropriate for their organizational

capacities. There is no minimum amount for implementation grants. At the same time, schools may submit concept papers for larger programs that, in addition to a potential implementation grant from the Endowment, would require funding from other sources. In these cases, schools should identify in their concept papers as much as possible the sources and estimated amounts of these other funds. Schools selected to prepare implementation grant proposals in the second stage of the initiative will be required to confirm the sources of these other funds and include them in their program budgets.

Concept Design Considerations

Through the Chaplaincy Initiative, the Endowment is interested in supporting efforts that assist schools in listening closely to the emerging spiritual interests and questions of their students and in enhancing the ways that they nurture the religious lives of their students. These efforts should also include clarifying the roles that chaplaincies play in maintaining connections with the school's historic religious tradition, in fostering relationships with local churches and faith communities and in advancing the school's mission. The ultimate hope is that these efforts will help to build and strengthen the organizational and financial capacities of chaplaincies and/or offices of religious life to enhance and sustain their ministries with students for the long term.

While eligible colleges and universities may propose a broad array of strategies for enhancing religious life on their campuses, the Endowment encourages schools to begin their deliberations about whether to submit a concept paper by engaging in a listening process with students to hear and understand more deeply their emerging spiritual questions and interests as well as the impacts of new technologies and other influential social and cultural forces on their religious lives. If a school has recently conducted these kinds of student listening sessions, it may wish to review key findings. In their concept papers, schools should describe how insights from these conversations with students helped them assess the strengths and weaknesses of their current ministries and informed the design of their proposed concept.

The Endowment also encourages presidents and other senior administrators, as appropriate, to be engaged in the deliberations about the design of the proposed concept. The Endowment believes that the initiative presents an opportunity for senior campus leaders, in conversation with chaplains, mission officers and other campus spiritual leaders, to review how chaplaincies and/or offices of religious life nurture the religious lives of students and contribute to the school's mission. These conversations may include considerations about how these ministries are connected to the school's historic or current religious tradition and how they relate to local churches and faith communities. The review may also consider how the ministries are grounded in and draw on practices and rituals from the school's historic religious tradition, while, at the same time, providing hospitality and support for students from a wide variety of faith traditions. In their concept papers, schools should articulate a shared understanding about the key roles that chaplains and spiritual leaders play in supporting students and strengthening campus life and how this understanding informs the design of their proposed concept.

One objective of the Chaplaincy Initiative is to foster more opportunities for students to explore potential vocations as religious leaders. In assessing strengths and weaknesses of current programs, schools should consider how chaplaincies and/or offices of religious life ministries are working intentionally to cultivate student leaders and providing encouragement for them to explore potential callings to religious leadership through on-campus (e.g., serving as a worship leader or leading a small group study) and off-campus experiences

(e.g., internship in local churches and faith communities or volunteering at a faith-based organization). Where applicable, the Endowment encourages schools to consider and identify potential partners and collaborators to support leadership development (e.g., local churches and faith communities, regional or national religious bodies, campus ministries, Bible institutes and theological schools, retreat and conference centers, religious camps, church and other religious networks, and independent religious agencies).

Colleges and universities have broad discretion to submit concepts that are based on assessments of current programs and a clear understanding of the roles of chaplains and spiritual leaders for efforts to enhance religious life on campuses and advance the aim and objectives of the initiative. The Endowment anticipates that many schools may propose concepts for programs that would include a combination of the following types of activities:

Enhancing religious life on campus

- Enhancing worship/prayer/devotional life on campus in ways that resonate with and reflect student interests, convictions, relationships and culture, including online and in person experiences.
- Providing more opportunities for students to learn and engage in a wide variety of practices and rituals that are grounded in the school's historic religious tradition, (if applicable) or in students' own faith traditions to help them explore spiritual questions, experience awe and wonder and grow in faith.
- Expanding opportunities to engage sacred texts and religious traditions in ways that reflect the students' everyday experiences and the historic, contemporary, local and global interpretations of faith and practice.
- Offering more opportunities for students to build community with their peers by expressing their faith through acts of love and service.

Fostering opportunities for students to serve as leaders

- Supporting student internships in local churches and faith communities to explore religious leadership.
- Establishing mentoring relationships between students and religious leaders and with other religious professionals in ministries (including worship, children's, youth, family ministries, etc.).
- Developing relationships with local churches and faith communities situated near the campus to enhance their collegiate ministries with students as leaders.

Building the organizational and financial capacities of chaplaincies and/or offices of religious life

- Increasing staffing.
- Upgrading technology.
- Streamlining or enhancing administrative functions.
- Strengthening fundraising to increase financial resources to support collegiate ministries.
- Reorganizing or restructuring offices of chaplains or religious life to better nurture the faith of students and contribute to the school's mission.

- Identifying and sustaining networks for strategic external partners and collaborators to support student leadership development such as local churches and faith communities, regional or national religious bodies, campus ministries, Bible institutes and theological schools, retreat and conference centers, religious camps, church and religious networks and independent religious agencies, etc.

If a college or university is a member of the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education or the Lilly Network of Church-related Colleges and Universities or participates in another Endowment-supported initiative, the school should describe in its concept paper its participation in these other efforts and how its concept for its proposed Chaplaincy Initiative program would complement, not duplicate, these activities.

Selection Criteria for Concept Papers

Concept papers will be evaluated on the quality and promise of the proposed programs and the extent to which they demonstrate the following:

- A coherent and compelling concept design for a potential program that shows significant promise to advance the initiative's aim and objectives.
- A clear understanding of the spiritual interests and questions of students and a thoughtful approach for nurturing the religious lives of students.
- A clear understanding about the roles that chaplains and other spiritual leaders play in contributing to campus life and in advancing the school's mission.
- The potential for the concept to be developed into a high-quality program that is realistic and feasible.
- A clear statement of the potential program's anticipated outcomes for students, faculty, administration and staff as well as local churches and faith communities that would be impacted by the program.
- A reasonable initial plan for how the school would sustain key program activities beyond the end of the grant period.

In addition, the Endowment will evaluate concept papers on the compelling character of the proposed program, not on the projected amount of the proposed implementation grant. Thus, the estimated size of an implementation grant needed to develop and execute the schools proposed concept will not advantage or disadvantage its opportunity to receive a grant. Colleges and universities should propose concepts for programs that they have the capacity to execute well and, if relevant, sustain beyond the implementation grant period.

As noted above, the Endowment intends to invite **up to 120 colleges and universities** that submit the most promising and compelling concept papers for potential programs to move into the Chaplaincy Initiative's second competitive stage. These selected schools may submit proposals for implementation grants that range **up to \$2.5 million each that may be used for up to a five-year period** to execute their plans.

Although the Endowment hopes that all invited organizations will submit strong implementation grant proposals and receive funding, the awarding of implementation grants to selected organizations is not guaranteed and is at the complete discretion of the Endowment. The Endowment intends to award **approximately 60 grants** to colleges and universities that submit compelling proposals that demonstrate that they have the imagination, commitment and capacity to design, implement and sustain high-quality programs.

Guidelines for Concept Papers

Complete concept papers must be submitted through the Chaplaincy Initiative Concept Paper Submission Form and must include the following components:

Official Request Letter: This **one-page** letter must be signed by the school's chief executive officer and the chair of its governing board. The letter should specify the amount requested from the Endowment for the proposed program.

Information Form: This form, provided on the initiative's webpage, requests key information about the college or university and identifies information about the individuals responsible for the development of the school's concept into a proposed program.

Executive Summary: This brief summary, **not to exceed one page**, should describe the school and its constituencies, the school's concept, potential key activities and how this effort would advance the aim and objectives of the initiative and advance the school's mission.

Concept Paper Narrative: This narrative must be **no more than seven pages** and should be written in 12-point font, single spaced with one-inch margins. In the narrative, schools should address the following:

- **College or University Profile:** Provide a brief description of the school, including its mission, history, profile of its student body, major programs and annual operating budget. What is the school's historic relationship to a religious tradition? What is its current relationship with this tradition or other religious communities? What are the key roles of chaplains and spiritual leaders on campus, and how do the programs of the school's chaplaincy or office of religious life contribute to the school's mission?
- **Rationale:** Explain the school's rationale for submitting a concept paper to create new and/or enhance existing efforts to nurture the religious lives of students. Why is it important for the school to undertake the proposed effort? Who are the students the school intends to reach through the program? How is this effort connected to the school's historic and/or current relationships with religious communities and traditions? How would it contribute to and advance the school's mission?
- **Design Process and Considerations:** Provide a brief discussion of the school's assessment of its current chaplaincy and related programs. What insights emerged from listening sessions with students about their spiritual questions and interests? What insights emerged from discussions about the roles of chaplains and spiritual leaders in supporting campus life? Based on these assessments, what are the strengths and weaknesses of current programs?
- **Concept:** Describe the school's concept for its proposed program, including its purpose, potential key activities and anticipated outcomes. How does the concept present a coherent strategy for advancing the initiative's aim and objectives?
 - › What is its overall approach for nurturing the religious lives of students?
 - › What potential activities will enhance religious life for students and deepen their faith?
 - › What potential activities will foster opportunities for students to explore religious leadership?
 - › What activities will build and strengthen the chaplaincy's organizational and financial capacities?
 - › What are anticipated outcomes for students, for chaplains and spiritual leaders, for faculty and administrators and/or for relationships with religious communities?

- **Participation in Endowment-supported Networks and Initiatives (if applicable):** If the college or university participates in NetVUE or the Lilly Network (or is involved in another Endowment-supported initiative), describe the school's related activities. What has the school learned from its participation? How would the concept for the school's proposed program complement, not duplicate, these activities?
- **Funding Level:** Provide the estimated costs to implement the proposed concept and indicate the level of funding the school would seek from the Endowment if invited to submit a proposal for an implementation grant. Why is this level of funding appropriate for the proposed program and the school? (The Endowment understands that these costs are preliminary estimates and may increase or decrease during a planning period.) What, if any, other sources of funding does the school expect to support the proposed concept's implementation and what are estimates of the amounts of any such support?
- **Sustainability of Proposed Program:** Provide a discussion about the school's initial plan to sustain, if successful, new and/or enhanced programs developed through a grant. What current sources of funding may be available? What new sources would need to be cultivated? (Schools invited to move into the initiative's second stage will be required to submit a sustainability plan with their implementation proposal.)
- **Development of Proposed Concepts:** Describe the school's anticipated planning activities (e.g., listening to students, engaging consultants, convening stakeholders, preparing an implementation grant proposal, etc.) if it is selected to move into the second stage of the initiative. Are there different groups of students the school would like to listen to? Are there specific activities the school would like to test to gauge student interest? Are there collaborations that would help extend the impact of program activities?

Letters of Support (optional): Schools may include **up to three** brief letters of support from partners and/or potential collaborators. These letters should note the anticipated role of potential collaborators in the implementation of the proposed concepts and their intention and capacity to undertake this role. Note that if a school is invited to submit an implementation grant proposal in the second stage of this initiative, updated letters of support/endorsement will be required.

Copy of Organization's Annual Audited Financial Statements: The annual *Audited Financial Statements* should be for the organization's most recently completed fiscal year. If the organization does not have *Audited Financial Statements*, it may submit with its concept paper *Reviewed Financial Statements* conducted by a certified public accounting firm.

Exempt Status and Charity/Foundation Status Information Form: This form, provided on the Endowment's website, is used to verify the organization's tax status as a qualified recipient of grants from private foundations such as Lilly Endowment. Please check a box in Section 2 of the form to reflect the organization's status. The organization's status may be located on an Internal Revenue Service exempt status determination letter, as indicated in Section 2 of the form and as described below.

Copy of Internal Revenue Service Exempt Status Determination Letter: This letter provides verification of the school's status as a 501(c)(3) organization and indicates the section of the tax code under which the organization's public charity status has been established. No grants will be awarded until the proper tax status is confirmed.

Concept Paper Submission Instructions and Checklist

Concept papers must be submitted through the Chaplaincy Initiative Concept Paper Submission Form on the [Chaplaincy Initiative webpage](#) and are **due January 11, 2027**.

Concept papers and supporting documents must be organized in the order listed below and uploaded as a single PDF.

- ☐ Official Request Letter - (one page)
- ☐ Information Form - (on the initiative's webpage)
- ☐ Executive Summary - (no more than one page)
- ☐ Concept Paper Narrative - (no more than seven pages)
- ☐ Letters of Support (optional) - (up to three)
- ☐ Copy of Organization's Annual Audited Financial Statements
- ☐ Exempt Status and Charity/Foundation Status Information Form - (on the initiative's webpage)
- ☐ Copy of IRS Exempt Status Determination Letter - (sample on the initiative's webpage)

Information Sessions: The Endowment will host virtual information sessions to discuss the Chaplaincy Initiative's guidelines for submission of concept papers. Schools wishing to participate in one of these sessions must register via one of the links on the [Chaplaincy Initiative's webpage](#) on the Endowment's website.

Please email any questions about this initiative to collegechaplaincy@lei.org.