

Rural Opportunities Initiative (ROI)

Overview of ROI & Funding Process

Overview of ROI

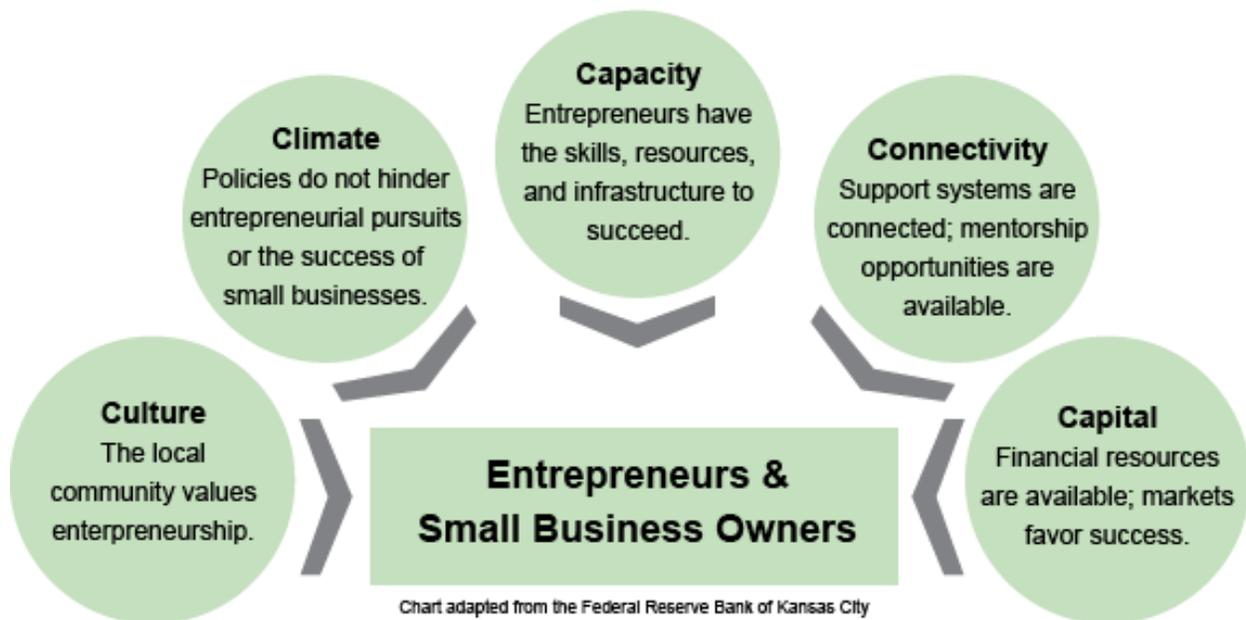
ROI is a strategy to unify and strengthen existing business development resources to build rural prosperity through capacity building grants. ROI values entrepreneurship-based economic development, which emphasizes the creation and support of entrepreneurs and small businesses. ROI is not a new layer, and it is not operating in competition with existing initiatives. Because of this, applicants are prioritized based on (1) their ability to demonstrate broad commitment and meaningful support from existing local economic development and small business support organizations, and (2) their ability to build the capacity of existing local economic development and small business support organizations, as well as, grow their collective ongoing efforts to strengthen the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Business Oregon then provides seed funding and capacity building support for these communities.

Funding Goals

The overarching goal of ROI's funding is to position rural communities for success as they strengthen entrepreneurship-based economic development in their communities. Objectives to meet goals include: building longevity through strengthened partnerships; connecting local resources to one another and to a statewide network; proactively ensuring equitable participation for entrepreneurs and service providers of all backgrounds and demographics; and increasing entrepreneurship by elevating and making existing resources more accessible, and by filling gaps in local resources through available statewide resource partners. These numerous factors that interact to create an environment that favors the development of entrepreneurs and businesses is often referred to as the 'entrepreneurial ecosystem.'

Defining an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

An entrepreneurial ecosystem is often defined as the array of services that support business development (e.g., capital, networking, and technical assistance providers). The term entrepreneurial ecosystem is also used to describe a larger set of factors that interact to create an environment that favors (or does not favor) development of entrepreneurs and small businesses. These factors are commonly referred to as the "Five Cs: Culture, Climate, Capacity, Connectivity, and Capital." ROI works to strengthen these factors locally as well as throughout the state.



History of Funding Process

ROI was initially funded through Business Oregon with additional funding leveraged from The Ford Family Foundation and Craft3.

Together, about \$400,000 was available for funding, which was marketed through partners and on our website. Eligible recipients included nonprofits, Native American Tribal governments, and government entities. More than 25 communities applied and four were ultimately selected.

Communities were selected for funding through a competitive RFP process. This included an RFP response (application) from all interested parties, and a presentation given by select finalists. The final four communities selected to be funded through ROI’s inaugural year included:

- La Grande’s “Jumping Sheet: A Landing Place for Entrepreneurs”
- Coos Bay’s “The REEF: Rural Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Framework”
- Baker City’s “HatchLab Baker”
- Klamath Falls’ “Klamath IDEA: Inspire Development, Energize Acceleration”

Each of these inaugural groups faced their own distinct barriers and opportunities, but they shared three traits: they prioritized entrepreneurship; they had a strong (and growing) group of partners representing multiple sectors; each were committed to growing local partnerships, and connecting to a larger statewide network, and creating a sustainable “entrepreneurial hub” (either a physical place or an area bound by geography—city, neighborhood, main street, etc.) for their community as a visible, accessible, one-stop-shop for small business development.

Lessons Learned

Business Oregon's process for distributing funding, as well as its continued work with existing communities, is in response to lessons learned during this first inaugural year. A formal "First Year in Review: Lessons Learned" document is available for funders; overarching themes include:

- A one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective. Readiness and success should be determined by a community's progress towards their own identified goals.
- Providing an abundance of resources is not useful unless a community has the capacity to take advantage of or explore these resources. Resources and support should be delivered in an individualized manner to maximize impact.
- Rural communities are diverse in thought, lived-experience, values, identities, ethnicities, races, and more. Naming and embracing this diversity is essential for providing equitable pathways to entrepreneurship.
- Much like businesses, funding tends to favor concept/idea or successful prototype, rather than the implementation and experimentation that comes between. It is this in between phase during which many businesses, and communities, fail. Funding needs to support intentional and realistic launch phases.
- An entrepreneurial culture is the essential foundation for long-term viability. The best-intentioned strategies will fail to take hold if the community does not embrace an entrepreneurial culture.
- Rural communities are resilient.
- Cultivating champions of entrepreneurship is essential. People power is the most effective way to ignite the entrepreneurial spirit inherent in all communities.
- A wealth of statewide support resources are available and with proper coordination, greater state-wide impact is possible.
- Great thinkers live in every part of Oregon. They have transformational ideas that can address pressing local and global problems provided they are allowed to thrive. Through entrepreneurial culture building, everyday people are encouraged to be great.

Application Requirements

Application requirements are dependent on whether a community is new or existing. New communities will be required to complete a Letter of Intent application. Semi-finalists are then asked to submit a full application in response to an RFP. Attachments such as recent financial statements and an organizational chart will also be required. Finalists will then be interviewed during a site visit.

Existing communities will not have to submit a Letter of Intent. Instead, they will submit a proposal in the form of a work plan, a project budget, and, following approval from the selection committee, they will then work with Business Oregon to finalize a funding agreement outlining commitments to which they must adhere.

See [Requirements for Existing Communities](#) for a full list of requirements.

Funding Available

The Oregon Legislature awarded \$750,000 for the biennium (2017-2019) to be used towards ROI. Of this funding, approximately \$25,000 will support capacity-building efforts for each group, and will offset expenses for the Kick-Off Workshop (a resource-rich day of learning and connecting for all communities). Approximately \$725,000 total is available for new and existing communities. Additionally, Business Oregon is working to match this funding, at least 1:1, with additional federal and foundation sources. Initial \$725,000, core funding, will be distributed within the following categories:

Category	Minimum Award	Maximum Award
Concept	\$5,000	\$45,000
Launch	\$10,000	\$75,000
Scale	\$15,000	\$100,000

Application Process Timeline

Date	Activity
Nov 8, 2017	Letter of Intent form released
Nov 14, 2017	Application requirements sent to existing communities
Dec 1, 2017, noon	Letters of Intent (new applicants only)
Jan 5, 2018	Semi-finalists invited to submit full proposal (RFP response)
Jan 8-9, 2018	Conference call options for semi-finalist applicant Q & A
Jan 16, 2018	Work plan and budget due from existing communities
Jan 29, 2018, 5:00 pm	Full proposals (new applicants only)
Feb 16, 2018	Finalists notified and site visits scheduled
Feb 20-28, 2018	Site visits conducted
Mar 12, 2018	Awardees announced
Mar 28-30, 2018	Kick-off working conference for all communities

Overview of Categories

Why Categories?

Every community is unique and offers a special set of challenges and opportunities. Through our inaugural ROI communities, Business Oregon learned that each was at a very different place on the spectrum of ecosystem-building—ranging from developing a shared language and overcoming community bias, to planning on purchasing multi-story buildings to combine and scale services.

This revised application process and establishment of categories is responsive to the needs of each community to meet them where they are on the spectrum of entrepreneurial ecosystem-building. The application questions and reporting requirements will reflect these variations rather than relying on a “one size fits all” approach.

Choosing a Category

Potential new and former grantees must indicate the category that best describes their community as it relates to building an **entrepreneurial ecosystem**.

Graduating to a New Category

Throughout the duration of the funding cycle, communities may “graduate” out of one group and move into the next. In doing so, they would be eligible for additional funding, if available, through a secondary application process. Please [refer to FAQ sheet](#) for more on this.

Detailed Category Description

The five C’s of an entrepreneurial ecosystem are identified for each characteristic and are listed within the category descriptors. The five C’s include:

1. Culture—the local community values entrepreneurship.
2. Climate—policies do not hinder entrepreneurial pursuits.
3. Capacity—entrepreneurs have the skills, resources, and infrastructure to succeed.
4. Connectivity—support systems are connected; mentorship opportunities are available.
5. Capital—financial resources are available; markets favor success.

Concept

The starting point to building broader community support.

Current Characteristics

Concept communities are in the early stages of identifying entrepreneurship as a viable long-term solution to the economic and social health of their community.

- Concept communities do not always have a culture (i.e., language for, support of, viability plan, community support, leadership support, or supporting policies) that is favorable for entrepreneurs, but they would like to change this. (Culture)
- In concept communities, there is a lack of data, assessments, or tracking to identify what exists, what services entrepreneurs are utilizing, what is lacking, and what would make the greatest impact. (Culture, Capacity)
- In concept communities, there are generally fewer support systems or services for entrepreneurs, or resources that do exist can be hard to access. The same is true for entrepreneurship education (for youth and adults). But concept communities are eager to assess what **does** exist so they can begin filling gaps. (Capacity, Connectivity)
- In concept communities, services for entrepreneurs may be disjointed or unconnected. There may be duplication and even competitiveness. But concept communities are ready to start building a more cohesive network. (Capacity, Connectivity)
- In concept communities, services, programs, and policies favor incumbents; it can be difficult for a diversity of ideas, services, and programs to be heard or represented. (Climate, Culture)

- In concept communities, there are key individuals or organizations poised to strengthen the entrepreneurial ecosystem of their community. (Capacity)
- In concept communities, those who are bolstering the entrepreneurial culture may have not yet had an opportunity to work together collectively. For those who **are** already working together, they may be struggling with a shared vision, in formalizing their partnerships, or building accountability and moving to action. Concept communities are working towards identifying and strengthening their core “concept community group” or “concept group.” (Connectivity, Culture)
- Concept communities are thinking big, but starting small. (Culture, Capacity)

Funding Range

\$5,000–\$45,000 to be utilized between April 2018 and January 2020.

Examples of Eligible Activities

Funding can be utilized for one or more of the following eligible activities. Note this is a representational, non-exhaustive list.

- Community assessments (surveys, focus groups, interviews, etc.) to determine what entrepreneur and business services exists, the current culture and climate as it relates to entrepreneurship, and overall community readiness to embark on building an entrepreneurial ecosystem. (Note: Business Oregon has assessment resources for communities to use. An assessment does not need to be contracted out to a third party but will include staff time and other human capital, along with potential costs for printed materials if applicable.)
- Additional time or time allocation of existing staff (with demonstration of new and expanded work duties).
- Hire additional new staff, interns, or contractors.
- Expansion of existing programming, launch of new entrepreneurship education programming, or in support of new partnerships and joint offerings.
- Campaigns, outreach, and networking events to build broad community support and develop an entrepreneurial culture.
- Stipends for professional development and/or to encourage broad participation in intentional vision setting (community makes the effort to understand its context, strengths, weaknesses, and role of partners moving forward).

Characteristics Present after Funding Period

Before continuing as a community Launch or Scale, or at the conclusion of the funding period, Concept communities should:

- Have established a team or network of entrepreneurs, individuals, businesses, local or regional government, and nonprofits, with demonstrated engagement and support from government entities representing diverse interests but with a shared vision for establishing an entrepreneurial culture. (As evidenced by meetings and a team/network roster; demonstration of growth of this team over time; evidence of joint projects or work; demonstration of a shared project or initiative name.) (Capacity, Connectivity)

- Have a diversity of voices represented in the group and during the planning stages, or have a plan for proactive outreach with evidence of some work already underway. (As evidenced by the diversity of races, ethnicities, Tribal/non-Tribal, ages, industries, genders, and support type represented within the group; evidence of proactive outreach methods.) (Culture, Capacity, Connectivity)
- Have worked to engage local government entities in the project (either as official members of the group or as unofficial supporters). It is critical that policy makers are engaged, aware, and ideally championing the community to support long-term systemic change. (As evidenced by outreach on behalf of the group.) (Climate, Culture, Capital)
- Have solidified the roles of each member and commitment to a shared vision. (As evidenced by shared vision statement/mission/values, MOUs for each member and an overview of the group—who, why, how, etc.) (Capacity)
- Have a clear idea of what entrepreneurial and small business resources exist in their community or region, and have a plan to address gaps in services. (As evidenced by completed assessments, 90-day Action Plan, a draft Strategic Plan, or other planning document.) (Capacity, Culture)
- Have identified other avenues for financial support to bolster the work. (As evidenced by a list of potential foundation funders, corporate partners, in-kind providers, etc.) (Capital)
- Have increased the amount or type of entrepreneurial support services that exist in their community. (As evidenced by participation records—attendance, course completion, number of inquiries, number of course offerings, number of speaker series, completed surveys, identified mentors, identified volunteers, etc.) (Capacity, Connectivity)
- Have sparked the beginning of an entrepreneurial culture in their community. (As evidenced by follow-up assessments, growth of attendance at events, increased utilization of services, media coverage, increased awareness of services as evidenced by increased inquiries, increased number of entrepreneurs active in community efforts, and number of new champions for entrepreneurship, vision is commonly known, network name is known, goals for the community are shared etc.) (Culture)

Launch

Rallying the community through action.

Current Characteristics

Launch groups are ready to grow in all respects—visibility, capacity, and support.

- Launch groups have a committed team of supporters but need to broaden their reach to ensure a diversity of representation. (Capacity, Connectivity, Culture)
- Launch groups have generated a buzz in their community but many still do not know about them. Launch groups are ready to build media relationships, and continue to enhance their positive image and clarify their role and purpose. (Culture)
- Launch groups may still need buy-in (agreement and acceptance) from government organizations who will help support long-term systemic change. Launch groups are ready to deepen their relationships with **all** partners. (Climate, Connectivity)
- Launch groups have a solid understanding of their community's limitations and opportunities and are in the final stages of formalizing a strategic plan of action. (Capacity)
- Launch groups may need additional staff and people power to keep up momentum. (Capacity)
- Launch groups may need more robust data to fully understand what would make the greatest impact among entrepreneurs. (Capacity)
- Launch groups may need to strengthen or grow relationships with co-investors, lenders, and capital outlets to help bring funding to their community for entrepreneurs. (Capital, Connectivity)
- Launch groups are ready to celebrate each milestone. (Culture)
- Launch groups are ready to expand beyond their local community and seek regional or statewide support; Launch groups are eager to tap into existing networks to deepen their understanding of the statewide ecosystem. (Connectivity, Capital)

Funding Range

\$10,000–\$75,000 to be utilized between April 2018 and January 2020.

Examples of Eligible Activities

Funding can be utilized for one or more of the following eligible activities. Note this is a representational, non-exhaustive list.

- Public events that award and reward—creating local competitions, hosting large-scale public events, recognizing entrepreneurs, and local businesses.
- Additional time or time allocation of existing staff (with demonstration of new and expanded work duties).
- Hiring additional new staff, interns, or contractors.
- Expansion of existing programming, launch of new entrepreneurship education programming, new mentorship opportunities for mentors, or in support of new partnerships and joint offerings.
- Filling gaps in local programming by connecting to existing networks or establishing new programming (e.g., financial capital training).
- Marketing and outreach to increase knowledge and utilization of new or existing services.

- Building entrepreneur networking infrastructure including mentor programs and virtual technology needed to support or improve communication and connectivity.
- Exploring partnerships with K-12 schools and existing youth entrepreneurship service provider resources to develop or provide entrepreneur curriculum to youth (e.g., virtual reality education, coding camps, robotics, mobile makerspace, storytelling, ag-tech etc.).
- Purchase of technology to support existing and new service offerings.
- Implementing diversity, equity and inclusion strategies to ensure entrepreneurial support systems are visible and accessible to all.
- Exploring available local and state funding options for entrepreneurs, including cultivating local investors, micro-lending, IDA's, other financing options and identifying pathways for access to existing VC networks and statewide competitions. This could also include building a database of existing capital resources.
- Community assessments (surveys, focus groups, interviews, etc.) to determine what entrepreneur and business services exists, the current culture and climate as it relates to entrepreneurship, and overall community readiness to embark on building an entrepreneurial ecosystem. (Note: Business Oregon has assessment resources for communities. An assessment does not need to be contracted out to a third party but will include staff time and other human capital, along with potential costs for printed materials if applicable.)

Characteristics Present after Funding Period

Before continuing as community Scale, or at the conclusion of the funding period, Launch communities should:

- Have established a diverse and formalized team or network and have a history of working together towards a common vision. (As evidenced by a team/network roster; MOUs, demonstration of growth of this team over time; evidence of joint projects or work.) (Capacity)
- Have a shared and formal vision for the work to be done in their community and a history of meeting milestones. (As evidenced by a Strategic Plan or Work Plan—with some tasks from the plan already underway.) (Capacity, Connectivity, Culture)
- Have successfully engaged local government entities in the project (either as official members or as unofficial supporters). It is critical that policy makers are engaged, aware, and ideally championing the group to support long-term systemic change. (As evidenced by support letters, attendance of government officials at events, and evidence of outreach on behalf of the community.) (Climate, Connectivity)
- Have a diversity of voices represented and a history of shared work. (As evidenced by the diversity of races, ethnicities, Tribal/non-Tribal, ages, industries, genders, and support type represented within the group; evidence of proactive outreach methods.) (Capacity, Culture)

- Have begun addressing gaps in services for entrepreneurs. (As evidenced by launch of new programs or new connections to existing services.) (Capacity)
- Have cultivated a diverse group of mentors who are actively working with entrepreneurs. (As evidenced by number of mentors available, number of mentor-mentee matches, protocols for connecting mentors with mentees, and ease of access per entrepreneurs.) (Connectivity, Capacity)
- Have increased the amount or type of entrepreneurial support services that exist in their community. (As evidenced by participation records—attendance, course completion, number of inquiries, number of course offerings, number of speaker series, completed surveys, identified mentors, identified volunteers, etc.) (Capacity, Connectivity, Capital)
- Have increased access to capital for entrepreneurs, and/or resources and training on what types of capital exist and how and when to access them. (As evidenced by growth of participation, community surveys, feedback from entrepreneurs, and successfully funding of small businesses.) (Capital, Connectivity)
- Have increased the connectivity and visibility of entrepreneurial support services. (As evidenced by growth of participation records, community surveys, feedback from service providers and entrepreneurs, new MOUs or partnerships with regional or statewide providers, evidence of marketing and outreach efforts.) (Connectivity, Capital)
- Have documented stories about entrepreneurs accessing new or improved services and launching or preparing to launch businesses. (As evidenced by video, audio, or written stories.) (Culture, Connectivity, Capital)
- Have solicited and received additional support to bolster efforts. (As evidenced by a history of submitting funding requests and broadening base of financial support to maximize sustainability.) (Capital)
- Have built and stoked a growing entrepreneurial culture in their community. (As evidenced by follow up assessments, growth of attendance at events, increased utilization of services, media coverage, increased awareness of services as evidenced by increased inquiries, increased number of entrepreneurs active in community efforts, number of new champions for entrepreneurship, vision is commonly known, network name is known, goals for the community are shared etc.). (Culture)
- Have an internal continuous improvement process in place to track success of programs, events, and initiatives. Have created collateral and marketing channels to share successes and lessons learned with the larger community. (As evidenced by evaluation tools utilized and communication outlets utilized.) (Capacity, Culture)

- Have succession plan in place that draws on supportive partners and ensures initiative continues despite change in leadership. (As evidenced by leadership development training, succession planning training, written plans in place for shared responsibility among broad partners.) (Capacity, Connectivity)

Scale

Scaling up and make major investments in the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Current Characteristics

Scale groups have significant and measurable momentum and are ready to maximize this potential.

- Scale groups have a history of successful, collaborative work both within their community and extending beyond. A major investment project would solidify these partnerships and ensure their continued success. (Connectivity, Capacity, Culture)
- Scale groups have built a positive image in their community. They are ready to capitalize on this image to rally community support for a big project. (Culture)
- Scale groups have adequate staff and people power to maintain activities started or grown to date. (Capacity)
- Scale groups have clear shared leadership that is reflective of the larger community. Scale groups have active champions, a pipeline from which to access new champions, and leadership includes women, youth, and communities of color (or an active plan is in place to increase diversity at the leadership level). (Culture, Capacity, Connectivity)
- Scale groups are active with K-12 and higher education partners and have defined youth entrepreneurship engagement programs (curriculum, camps, competitions, etc.) (Connectivity, Culture)
- The work of Scale groups is responsive to identified community needs. The major investment project to be undertaken is a result of community assessments and on-the-ground work with entrepreneurs and partners. (Culture, Climate, Capacity)
- Scale groups have a strong knowledge of physical environment; clear considerations for the community's physical infrastructure and ties to entrepreneurship development are clear and deliberate. (Culture, Capacity)
- Scale groups have meaningful partnerships that are diverse and productive. These partnerships include government and other regional economic development agencies. (Climate, Connectivity, Culture)
- Scale groups have diverse avenues of funding (foundations, corporations, in-kind, etc.). Scale groups have identified their ongoing expenses, jointly and separately. (Capital)
- Scale groups are working with youth in high schools and colleges to build a pipeline of entrepreneurs and to sustain an entrepreneurial culture. (Culture)
- Scale groups have fund-ready entrepreneurs and have deep knowledge of the capital available for entrepreneurs in their community. (Capital, Capacity)
- Scale groups have begun to interweave their programming into regional and statewide networks. (Connectivity, Culture)

- Scale groups are working with government agencies towards systemic, long-term change. (Climate)

Funding Range

\$15,000–\$100,000 to be utilized between April 2018 and January 2020.

Examples of Eligible Activities

Funding can be utilized for one or more of the following eligible activities. Note this is a representational, non-exhaustive list.

- Preparing for new or expanded physical infrastructure (e.g., feasibility studies, preliminary architectural and engineering work, and other soft-costs—legal, planning, etc.)
- Physical infrastructure and capital purchases (e.g., hard construction costs, purchase of land or buildings, purchase of technology, and equipment, etc.)
- Additional time or time allocation of existing staff (with demonstration of new and expanded work duties).
- Hiring additional new staff, interns, or contractors (skilled entrepreneurial facilitators or coaches).
- Working regionally to increase total deal-flow, total opportunity, and to elevate the visibility of all community businesses among statewide investors.
- Working with government entities to change policies that hinder entrepreneurs and small businesses.
- Scaling of existing programming (building capacity of existing programming to reach additional or expanded audiences).
- Additional fundraising and development work to sustain work to date.

Characteristics Present after Funding Period

At the conclusion of the funding period, Scale communities should:

- Have completed or made significant progress towards a major investment in their entrepreneurial ecosystem. (As evidenced by the erection of a new structure, the reconfiguration of an existing structure, capital improvements or purchases, or new program materials, curricula, or delivery mechanism). (Capacity, Climate, Culture)
- Have leveraged additional significant and diverse funding to support this major investment. Have a five-year fund development plan and pro-forma to support this major investment. (As evidenced by committed and pending funding, list of in-kind support, and pro-forma.) (Capital)
- Have significantly increased the amount or type of entrepreneurial support services that exist in their community. (As evidenced by participation records—attendance, course completion, number of inquiries, number of course offerings, number of speaker series, completed surveys, identified mentors, identified volunteers, etc.) (Capacity)

- Have addressed significant gaps in services for entrepreneurs. (As evidenced by community assessments and the launch of new programs or new connections to existing services.) (Capacity)
- Have increased entrepreneurial support services for diverse entrepreneurs. (As evidenced by growth of participation records, community surveys, feedback from service providers and entrepreneurs, new MOUs or partnerships with organizations that serve diverse audiences, evidence of culturally-responsive marketing and outreach efforts.) (Capacity, Culture)
- Have received additional support to bolster efforts. (As evidenced by a history of receiving funding requests and a broad base of financial support to maximize sustainability.) (Capital)
- Have a strong entrepreneurial culture in their community. (As evidenced by follow up assessments, growth of attendance at events, increased utilization of services, media coverage, increased awareness of services as evidenced by increased inquiries, increased number of entrepreneurs active in community efforts, and number of new champions for entrepreneurship, vision is commonly known, network name is known, goals for the community are shared etc.) (Culture)
- Have helped entrepreneurs access capital, have worked regionally to bring state-wide investors to their area. (As evidenced by list of capital investments per local entrepreneurs.) (Capital)
- Have documented stories of thriving entrepreneurs. (As evidenced by video, audio, or written stories.) (Capital, Culture)
- Have begun to work towards systemic change—changes in laws, policies, or ordinances—to develop a local climate that supports entrepreneurs and small businesses. (As evidenced by meeting minutes, work in Legislature, awareness and outreach activities aimed at government agencies, etc.) (Climate)

Application & Scoring

The purpose of a Letter of Intent (application) is to reduce initial barriers to participation. The Letter of Intent is shorter and less complex than a response to a Request for Proposals, thereby reducing the time burden on potential applicants. It also helps the review committee more quickly filter out applicants that do not meet the basic criteria or are not a strong match with ROI's goals. The Letter of Intent focuses more on alignment, whereas **the full proposal will require more specific information about activities, outcomes, partner engagement, and more.**

Eligibility Requirements

1. This is a fund to support collaborative work. Applicants must be applying on behalf of three or more total partners (including the applicant).
2. Groups must then identify a “Lead Agency” to serve as the applicant. Applicants are responsible for receiving and managing funding, if selected.
3. The proposed Lead Agency must be based in a geographic area with a population of 30,000 or less **and** proposed activities must benefit residents of a geographic area with a population of 30,000 or less.
4. In addition to working collaboratively (or having a plan to work collaboratively), eligible applicants must be focused on improving the [entrepreneurial ecosystem](#) in support of entrepreneurs and small businesses.
5. Please read ROI’s [Overview of Categories](#) to learn more about allowable expenses, sample projects, and characteristics of each category.

Lead Agency

It is required that Lead Agencies must be either a tribal government, 501(c)(3) nonprofit, government agency (city, county, economic development district, etc.), or educational institution. For profit business and individuals are not eligible to apply. Additionally, the Lead Agency must be based in a geographic area with a population of 30,000 or less.

Review Process

The Letter of Intent application will be published on November 8, 2017, with completed applications due by noon on December 1, 2017. Applicants who are invited to submit a full proposal will be notified by January 5, 2018. Full proposals (responses to a published Request for Proposals) will be due by January 29, 2018. Applications are reviewed and scored by a selection committee comprised of entrepreneurs and representatives from rural-based development organizations, foundation grant-makers, capital lenders, and higher education.

Scoring Criteria

A formal rubric with a scale of 1-5 points per questions will be created and distributed to each member of the Review Committee. This rubric will include separate guidelines per category (Concept, Launch, Scale). A total of 30 points are possible with scoring criteria in the following categories:

Application Section	Scoring Criteria
Applicant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicant serves a rural community. • Applicant has experience serving entrepreneurs or contributing to the entrepreneurial ecosystem.
Partners & Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicant has committed or identified partners and a plan for working together. • Applicant would be able to leverage additional partnerships through this funding.
Challenges & Opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicant demonstrates an understanding of the challenges entrepreneurs in their community face, and can articulate how that relates to the broader economic landscape. • Applicant demonstrates an understanding of the opportunities in their community and how they relate to entrepreneurship.
Urgency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicant make a compelling argument that funding would address an urgent need or opportunity. • Funding would make a demonstrable impact on this community.
Alignment with ROI's Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding would increase the community's capacity to better serve entrepreneurs. • Funding would deepen partnerships necessary for a cohesive entrepreneurial ecosystem.
Budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The amount requested is reasonable compared to the activities proposed. • The proposed expenses align with the activities and goals described by the applicant.