

From Idea to Fundable Project

ILLINOIS COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
GRANTS ACADEMY SEMINAR



APRIL 2025



Who's that??

JESSICA VENABLE, PHD, GRANTS ACADEMY FACILITATOR



Jess Venable, PhD
Partner, Thorn Run Partners

Jessica (Jess) Venable co-leads the firm's Grants Enterprise Strategy consulting practice, which assists clients in increasing the extramural funding base needed to support programs and services, research, outreach and engagement, partnerships, and the innovation ecosystem.

With more than 25 years' experience, she delivers a unique combination of solutions-focused consulting services including strategic planning, government relations, public relations, grants enterprise development and capacity building, partner engagement, Team Science, program design, and grant proposal development.

Jessica also leads Thorn Run Partners' Grantsmanship Initiative. Successful grantsmanship requires a skillset that is built, continually developed, and adapts to evolving contexts. Using a "coaches" approach to learning, Jess helps grant writers self-discover solutions to proposal development, while challenging conventional thinking about research funding that create barriers across cultures and institutions.

Her client portfolio spans the higher education, non-profit, and local government sectors, for whom she has helped win more than \$700 million in competitive grant awards across the past decade alone.

Phone: (240) 930-2843

Email: jvenable@thornrun.com

idea! → Grant! → Nobel Prize!

What we get...

What we want...





Writing a successful grant application is an art

Although the “science” is primarily being evaluated, presentation and respect for the requirements of the funding agency are key aspects that can make or break an application.

Source: Kraicer, J. (1997). The Art of Grantsmanship. <https://www.hfsp.org/sites/default/files/webfm/Communications/The%20Art%20of%20Grantsmanship.pdf>



**Blah, blah, blah.
Just tell me the rules for writing a
grant and I'll do those things.**

- ▶ Give me a template.
- ▶ Give me a checklist.
- ▶ What work?
- ▶ What doesn't work?
- ▶ Tell me what to write, and I'll write it.
- ▶ Why are you so annoying?





**Blah, blah, blah.
Just tell me the rules for writing a
grant and I'll do those things.**

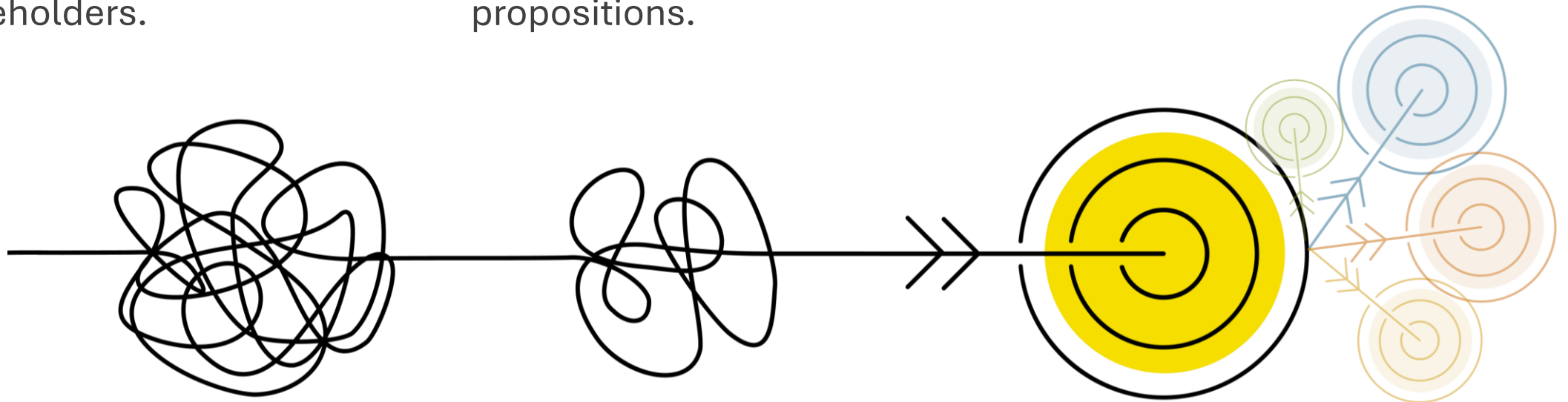
“My epiphany came when I realized that grant programs do not exist to make me successful, but rather **my job is to make those programs successful.**”

Source: Porter, R. (2007). Why academics have a hard time writing good grant proposals. The Journal of Research Administration, 38, 161-167.

OMG, another training? On a Friday??

FROM IDEA TO FUNDED PROJECT

- ▶ **Understand diverse values:** Recognize how your work creates different types of value for various stakeholders.
- ▶ **Translate & transform research ideas:** Convert academic interests into compelling value propositions.
- ▶ **Develop strategic fit:** Match your project elements with specific funding source priorities.



A yellow, rectangular character with large, round eyes and a wide-open mouth, appearing shocked or surprised. It is standing in a desert landscape with mountains in the background.A solid green square in the top left corner.

Because we were not expecting THIS

Understanding what sponsors value

Our new grant “reality.”

WE WERE NOT PREPARED FOR THIS...

THE CHRONICLE
OF PHILANTHROPY


Sign In

SUBSCRIBE

Faced With Anti-DEI Complaint, Gates Foundation Opens Scholarship to White Students

After Edward Blum’s complaint to the IRS about the Gates Foundation’s “illegal” scholarship program for students of color, the Seattle philanthropy giant said it would change the scholarship’s eligibility criteria to include all races.

By *Alex Daniels* | APRIL 14, 2025



SUSAN WALSH/AP

Less than two weeks after a conservative legal activist asked the Internal Revenue Service to strip the Gates Foundation of its tax-exempt status for offering scholarships based on race, the largest private foundation in the United States has decided to open its signature scholarship program to students of all races. The move makes the Gates Foundation the latest organization to change parts of its mission amidst the Trump administration’s aggressive push against diversity, equity, and inclusion programs.

COSSA

WASHINGTON UPDATE

Latest from the White House (April 1)

April 1, 2025 | Executive Branch News, Latest from the White House

COSSA continues to follow the flurry of executive actions taken by the Trump Administration and the impact those actions are having on the social and behavioral science community. Below are some of the latest developments coming out of the White House. Past updates are available [here](#).

Eliminating the Department of Education

As promised on the campaign trail, President Trump issued an Executive Order (EO) on March 20 that instructs the Education Secretary to begin the process of closing the U.S. Department of Education. The order, *Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities*, directs the Secretary to “facilitate the closure of the Department of Education and return authority over education to the States and local communities **while ensuring the effective and uninterrupted delivery of services, programs, and benefits on which Americans rely.**” (emphasis added)

The order does not provide a timeline for the process, nor does it include any additional guidance. Education policy experts and advocates are raising serious concerns about the order, including, importantly, the ability to ensure “effective and uninterrupted delivery” of current services, especially in light of recent, massive **layoffs** at the Department.

Federal agencies can only be created and therefore eliminated by an act of Congress. The Executive Order does not guarantee the closure of the Department of Education. However, the Administration can use its authority to effectively close the agency by eliminating staff, making it practically impossible for the agency to meet its mission.

Visit COSSA’s [Action Center](#) to see our alerts related to the Department of Education and threats to education data.

“Restoring” American History

On March 27, the President issued an Executive Order aimed at reversing “a concerted and widespread effort to rewrite our Nation’s history, replacing objective facts with a distorted narrative driven by ideology rather than truth.” The EO, *Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History*, criticizes the Biden Administrations for reconstructing American history in a way that portrays the Nation as “racist, sexist, oppressive, or otherwise irredeemably

Subscribe

SIGN UP

Past Newsletters

Select Category

Browse

All Tags

All Sections

SUBMIT

Archive

Browse 40 years of the COSSA Washington Update.

Science

News Home All News ScienceInsider News Features |

DONATE

HOME > NEWS > SCIENCEINSIDER > PENTAGON GUTS NATIONAL SECURITY...

SCIENCEINSIDER | FUNDING

Pentagon guts national security program that harnessed social science

Dozens of U.S. academics lose grants from Minerva program for studies related to terrorism, drug trafficking, and other threats


2 MAR 2025 • 2:00 PM ET • BY KAI KUPFERSCHMIDT

SHARE:

The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) is gutting a landmark project designed to fund social science research with important implications for national security. Dozens of researchers with grants under the Minerva Research Initiative (MRI)—studying violent extremism, disinformation, and threats from climate change, for example—have had their grants terminated in recent days. Participants in the most recent round of applications received an email that the department was “no longer offering the Minerva University Research Competition.”

MRI, **billed by the Pentagon as “Social science for a safer world,”** was **established in 2008**. It has been awarding 3- to 5-year grants for unclassified research by university researchers “to help DOD better understand and prepare for future challenges.” In its latest funding round, in August 2024, the department **awarded \$46.8 million to 19 teams** to work on topics from the use of artificial intelligence in national security to the movement of people displaced by climate change. At least nine of those projects have received termination notices, as have more than a dozen projects from previous rounds.

DOD did not immediately answer questions about the reason for the terminations and the criteria used to decide which projects to ax. “I wish I could tell you that I see a pattern in the ones that are being cut that I know about,” says Neil Johnson, a physicist at George Washington University who also lost a grant. “I’m not sure that I do.” Many researchers worry



The 9/11 terror attacks in the United States, periodically memorialized in New York City with twin beams of light representing the destroyed World Trade Center buildings, led to a defense program called Minerva that draws on social science research. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

9

THORN RUN PARTNERS
REDEFINING THE ART OF ADVOCACY.

Our new grant “reality.”

WE WERE NOT PREPARED FOR THIS...



Federal Government

To advance the taxpayers’ interests.



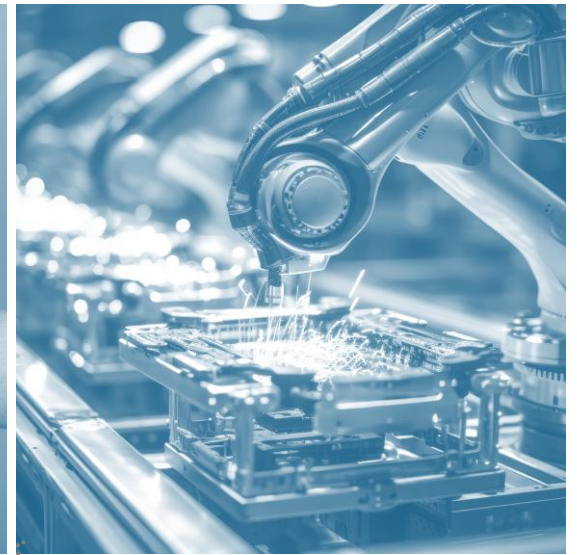
Professional Societies

To further the interests of a target scientific discipline, community.



Foundations

To promote the mission of the organization, public good.



Industry

To support commercial interests.





Defining value

WHAT SPONSORS CARE ABOUT

Now What? Call for Proposals

What? Sponsor Mission & Strategic Plan

So What? Sponsor Vision

Why? Societal Challenges



Defining value

WHAT SPONSORS & PARTNERS CARE ABOUT

FOUNDATIONS	CORPORATE	SCHOOLS	POLICY-FOCUSED
Social impact Equity advancement Innovation in practice	Workforce development Educational technology validation Community relations	Practical solutions to immediate challenges	Evidence that can inform decision-making



It's not your daddy's funding landscape


ALTERNATIVE AWARD MECHANISMS





Pursue with caution

ALTERNATIVE FUNDING PATHWAYS

If you are unfamiliar with any of these mechanisms:

STOP!!

Check with SPA.

Get expert guidance

Industry and Private Funding Matrix

This matrix identifies typical attributes associated with a variety of industry and private funding contracts. The matrix also seeks to clarify the nature of gifts, grants and contracts from industry for our campus units, and to provide guidance for prospective industry partners. Contact SPA with any questions.

Attribute	Charitable Contribution or Gift	Affiliations ¹	Grant	Facilities Use (Research Facilities and Equipment)
Intellectual Property Terms (Inventions, Copyrightable Works)	UIUC owns; sponsor gains no free rights to use	UIUC and/or partner institution owns; members have rights to license	UIUC owns	Sponsor owns
Publication Terms	No restrictions; may acknowledge donor support in publications	No restrictions, but publications may be reviewed by members before release to the public	No restrictions	Not applicable
Scope of Work	May be unrestricted or targeted toward donor intent	No specific direction by member except as generally allowable under grant	Investigator-defined project scope	Defined research purpose for use of university-specialized equipment or facilities
Materials	None	May be exchanged among members	Sponsor may provide	Sponsor may utilize
Deliverables	None; gift acknowledgement or summary report	Progress reports/copies of publications and invention disclosures	Financial and progress reporting; no expectant tangible	Not applicable

Value crosswalk

BY STAKEHOLDER CATEGORY

Sponsor	What they value	Examples	Value Indicators
Federal Agencies	Alignment with national priorities, rigorous methodology, potential for scalable impact	IES, NSF, NIH	Evidence-based practices, addressing achievement gaps, improving educational outcomes
Private Foundations	Advancing specific social missions, innovative approaches, addressing inequities	Gates Foundation, Spencer Foundation, Wallace Foundation	Innovation, equity focus, community engagement, potential for systems change
Corporate Funders	Workforce development, product/service validation, community relations, brand enhancement	Technology companies, publishing companies, healthcare systems	Skills development, educational technology validation, talent pipeline development
Education Systems	Practical solutions to immediate challenges, improving metrics	School districts, state education agencies, higher education systems	Teacher retention, student achievement, cost-effective interventions
Community Orgs	Local impact, culturally responsive approaches, community engagement	Community foundations, regional nonprofits, parent organizations	Family engagement, community voice, addressing local education challenges



**Because we don't
all speak the
same language.**

Value translation process





What interests me as a researcher?



Why should anyone else care?

What questions fascinate me?



What problems can I help others solve?

What will advance knowledge in my field?



What value does this create for specific stakeholders?



Value pivots

THREE EXAMPLES

	Original Focus	Value Pivot	Funding Success
Literacy	Investigating multimodal literacy practices in adolescents	Developing critical digital literacy skills needed for tomorrow's workforce	Corporate funding from technology companies concerned about future talent pipeline
Teacher Education	Examining professional identity development in pre-service teachers	Strengthening teacher retention in high-need districts through identity-affirming preparation programs	Foundation funding focused on educational equity and teacher workforce stability
Math Education	Students' conceptual understanding of algebraic reasoning	Addressing mathematics achievement gaps through targeted instructional strategies	Funded partnership with district seeking to improve standardized test performance



Value crosswalk

IN PRACTICE

As an educational linguist, I'm interested in **investigating the challenges multilingual learners face when developing academic language proficiency in STEM subjects.**

My preliminary observations suggest that **content-area teachers often lack specific strategies for supporting language development** alongside content learning, particularly in middle school settings where academic vocabulary becomes increasingly specialized.

I'm curious about how explicit academic language instruction integrated with science and mathematics content might **affect both content comprehension and language acquisition.**

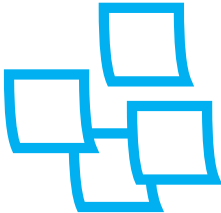
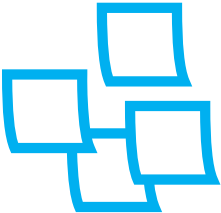
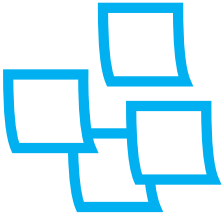
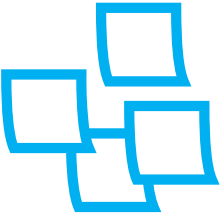
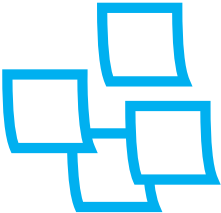
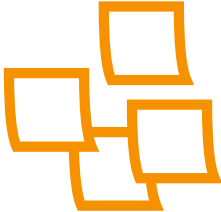
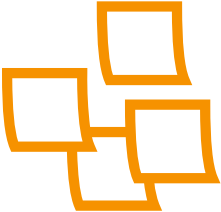
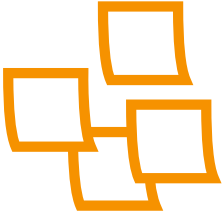
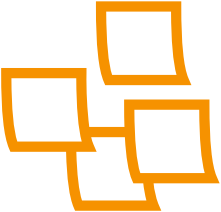
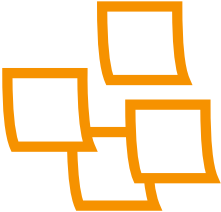
I'd like to explore the potential effectiveness of a pedagogical approach that combines content-based instruction with targeted academic language development.

Specifically, I want to examine how **metacognitive strategies around discipline-specific language patterns might help multilingual learners better access STEM content while developing the academic language skills needed for success in these subjects.**

Understanding this relationship could contribute to our theoretical knowledge about language acquisition in content-area contexts.

Value crosswalk

IN PRACTICE

	IES	Spencer Foundation	Pearson	IL State Board of Edu	WalMart
What might the SPONSOR value about this work?					
Where might the SPONSOR find natural alignment between the educational linguists' interests and their own?					



Break





**Because “it’s all
in my head” is
not a good
funding strategy.**

Value transformation

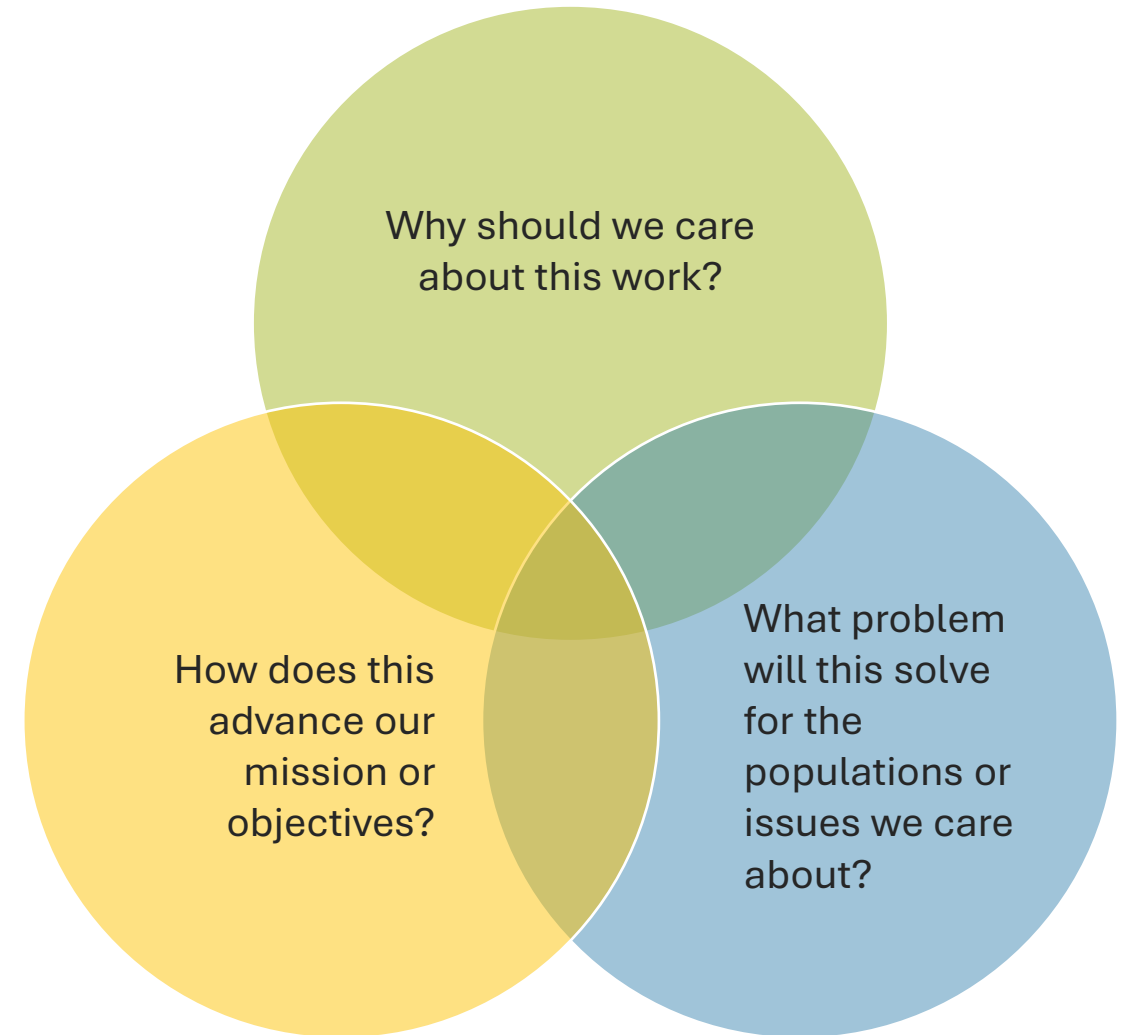


Creating value beyond your own head.

THE VALUE PROPOSITION MINDSET

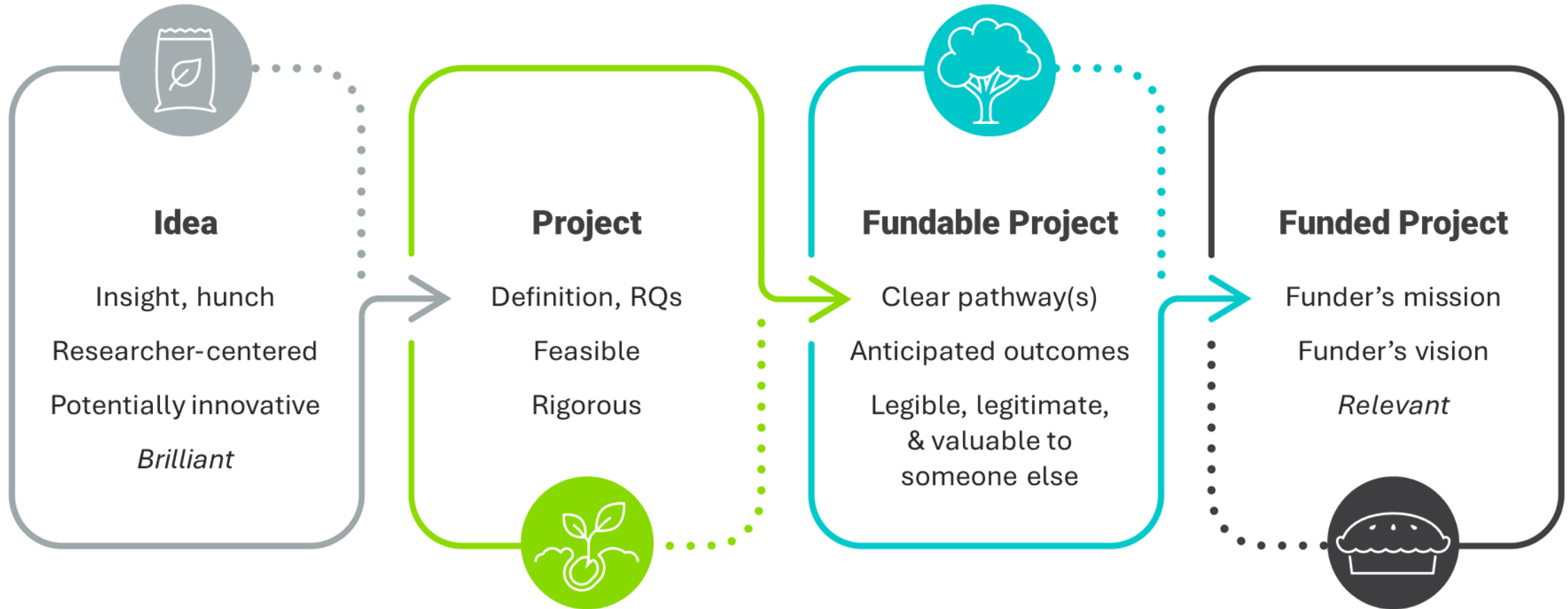
The fundamental difference between a project and a fundable project is straightforward:

A fundable project creates clear value for specific stakeholders beyond the researcher.



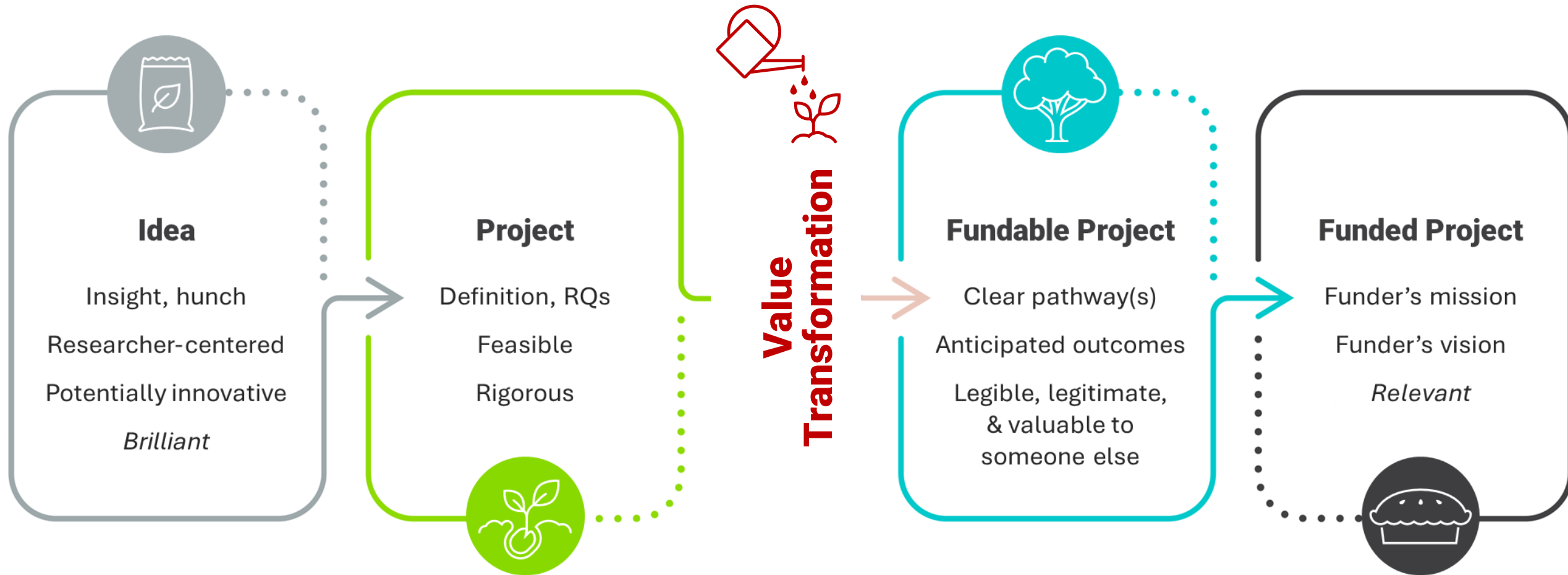
The progression.

MAP WHERE YOU ARE VS WHERE YOU NEED TO BE



The progression.

VALUE TRANSFORMATION



The progression.

VALUE TRANSFORMATION



Idea

Insight, hunch

Researcher-centered

Potentially innovative

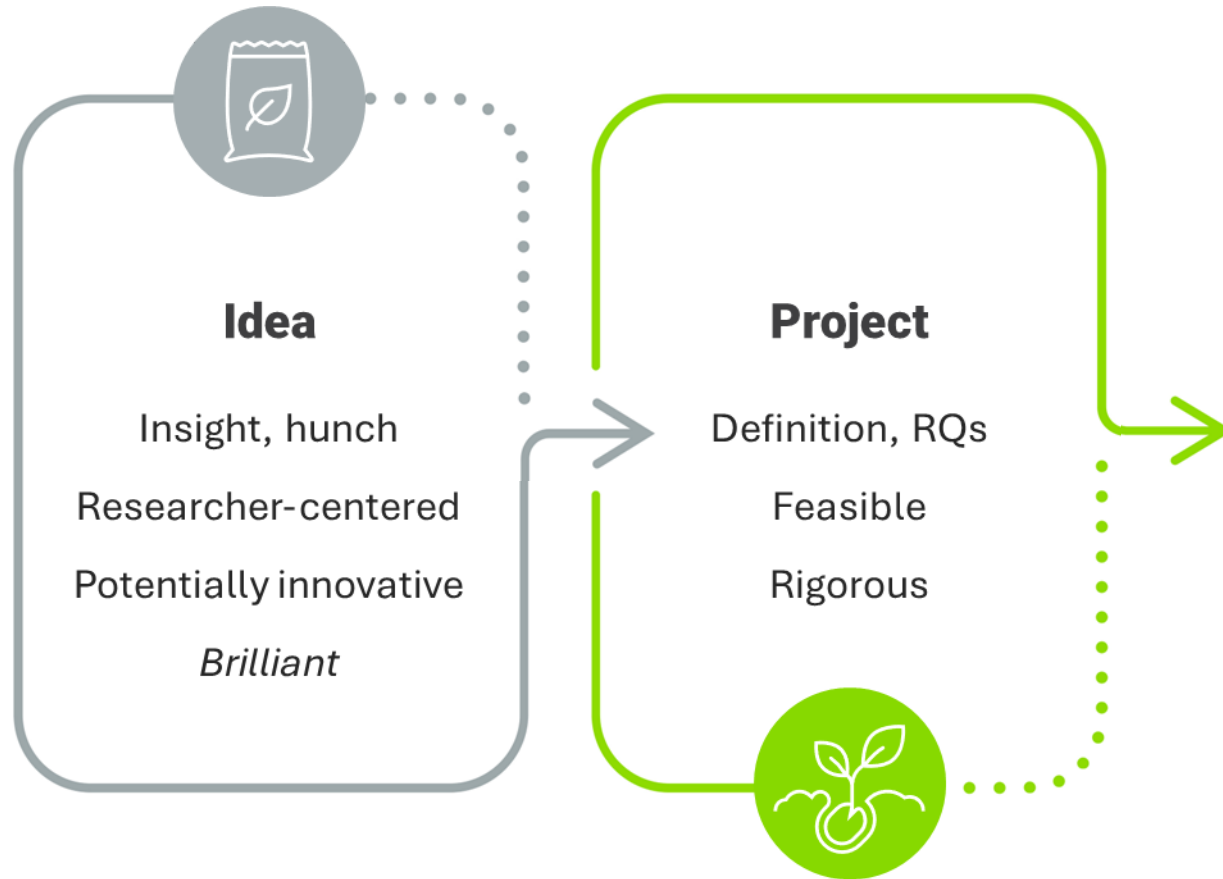
Brilliant

As an educational linguist, I'm interested in **investigating the challenges multilingual learners face when developing academic language proficiency in STEM subjects.**



The progression.

VALUE TRANSFORMATION

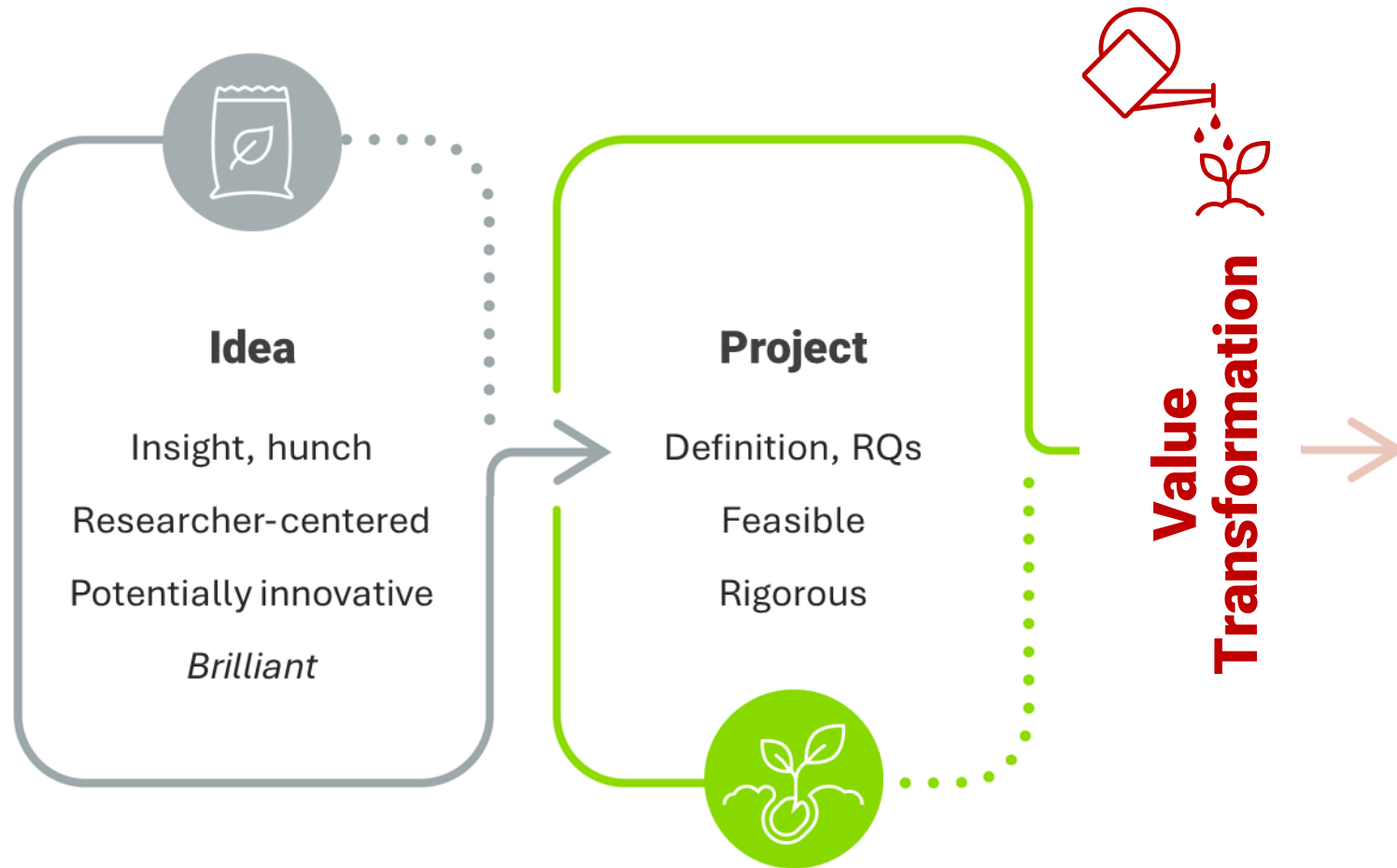


A **mixed-methods** study examining how explicit instruction in **discipline-specific language patterns affects** multilingual students' **comprehension** and language development in **middle school science classes**.



The progression.

VALUE TRANSFORMATION



For school districts: This approach helps meet accountability requirements for ELL performance.

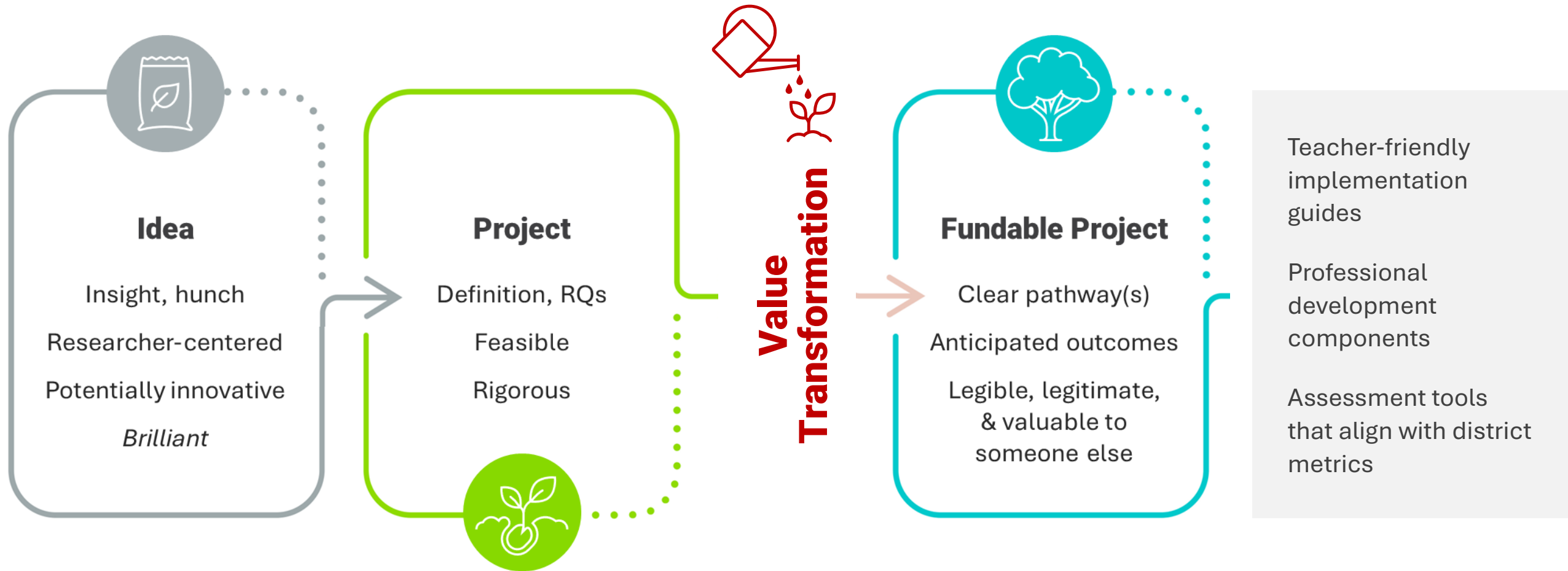
For foundations: This work addresses educational equity by removing language barriers to STEM success.

For publishers: These strategies can enhance the effectiveness of your STEM curriculum materials.



The progression.

VALUE TRANSFORMATION



The art of value transformation

AUTHENTICITY MATTERS



- ▶ Maintain core integrity
- ▶ Expand, don't distort
- ▶ Speak multiple languages
- ▶ Look for genuine alignment



The art of value transformation

AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Original

As an educational linguist, I'm interested in investigating the challenges multilingual learners face when developing academic language proficiency in STEM subjects.

For IES

This project will **develop and test evidence-based instructional strategies** that simultaneously address content mastery and language acquisition for ELLs—addressing a critical need in **meeting ESSA requirements** for multilingual student achievement.

The art of value transformation

AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Original

As an educational linguist, I'm interested in investigating the challenges multilingual learners face when developing academic language proficiency in STEM subjects.

For Pearson

This research will identify effective techniques for **integrating academic language support into STEM curriculum materials**, enhancing their effectiveness for the growing multilingual student population and providing competitive advantage through built-in teacher support.

The art of value transformation

AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Original

As an educational linguist, I'm interested in investigating the challenges multilingual learners face when developing academic language proficiency in STEM subjects.

For LEA

This project will equip your STEM teachers with **practical, classroom-ready techniques** that improve both content comprehension and language development for multilingual learners, directly addressing achievement gaps in **your standardized assessment data**.





**Because all
money is not
created equal.**

Value fit

Determine if this is the right opportunity.

DECISION MATRIX

Category	Question	Score
Alignment	The opportunity aligns with my research, scholarly goals, and priorities.	
Eligibility	I, my organization, and my team is eligible to apply .	
Need	I can demonstrate a clear and compelling need for the proposed funding.	
Program	I have a well-thought-out program design or project that fits the sponsor's objectives.	
Support	I have buy-in from key stakeholders, partners, or community groups required?	
Capacity	I have access to resources (staff, space, tech) needed to implement the project.	
Budget	My budget is realistic and matches the funding scope and guidelines.	
Experience	I have experience managing similar grants or projects.	
Compliance	I am prepared to meet all compliance, reporting, and accountability requirements.	
Timeline	I can realistically meet deadlines for submission, implementation, and reporting?	

5 = Definitely YES; 0 = Definitely NO



Determine if this is the right opportunity.

MAKE AN HONEST ASSESSMENT

40 - 50

High fit & readiness

Strong contender for this opportunity

30 - 39

Moderate fit & readiness

Address gaps before proceeding.

< 30

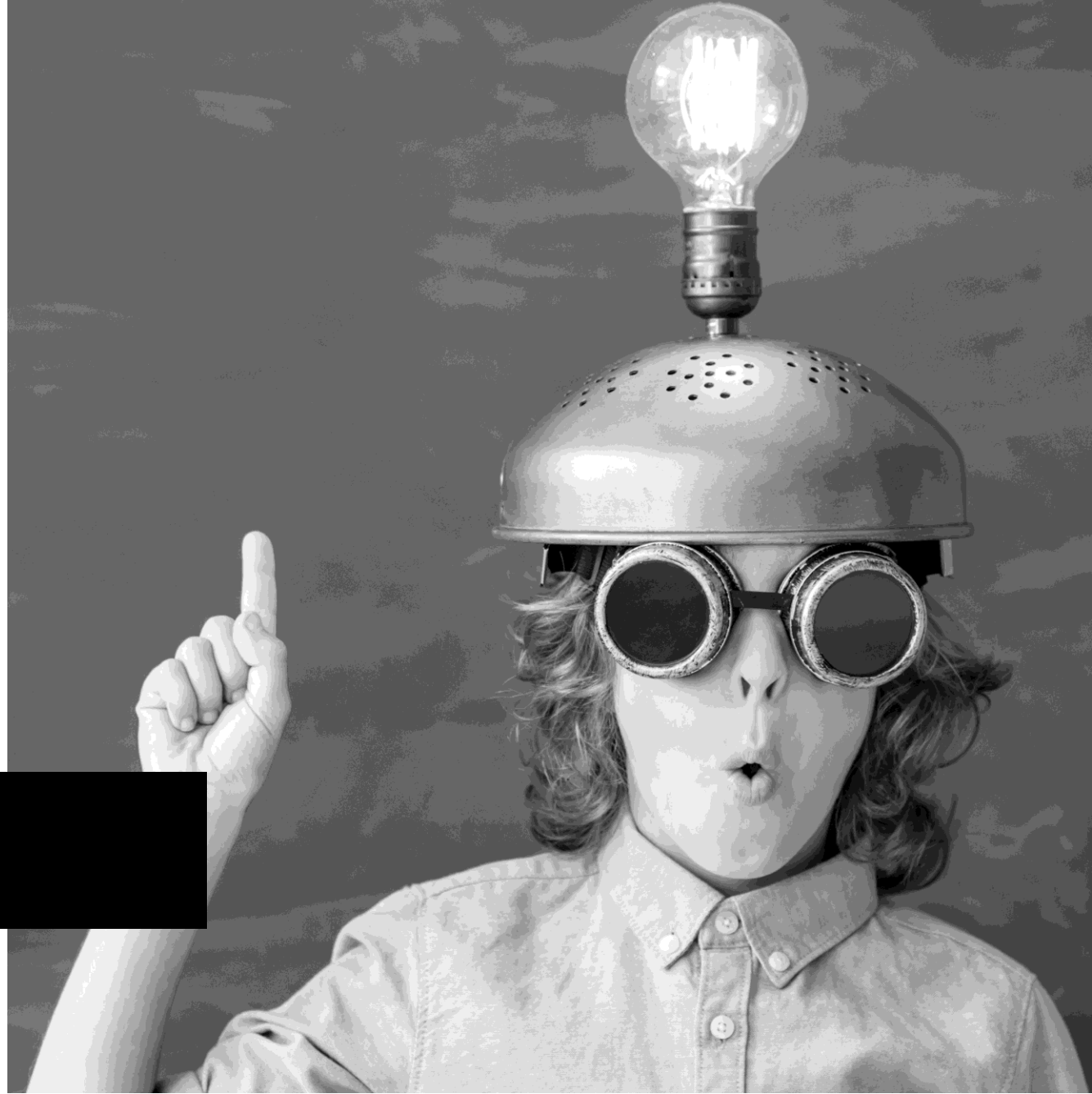
Low fit & readiness

Consider other opportunities or strengthen areas of weakness.

Certain categories may have greater importance based on the grant or organizational priorities. Apply weightings as necessary.



Now What?



- ▶ Who beyond academia might find value in this work?
- ▶ What specific problems am I helping them solve?
- ▶ How can I articulate outcomes in terms they care about?
- ▶ What elements could I add that would increase value without compromising my research integrity?
- ▶ How might I need to adjust my language to resonate with their priorities?





Fun Fact

Non-Federal sponsors
are not immune to
trends in Federal
funding.

Fun Fact

Some non-Federal funders don't care about the trends in Federal funding.



Wall of Questions

WHAT?

WHERE?

SO
WHAT?

WHEN?

HOW?

WHY?

NOW
WHAT?

WHO?

HOW
MUCH?





**We look forward to
working with you.**

Washington, DC

100 M Street, SE – Ste. 750
Washington, DC 20003
Phone: (202) 688-0225

Los Angeles

23371 Mulholland Drive – Ste. 145
Los Angeles, CA 91364
Phone: (310) 774-0292

Portland

610 SW Alder – Ste. 1008
Portland, OR 97205
Phone: (503) 927-2032

W W W . T H O R N R U N . C O M