

Partnership for Action Learning in Sustainability (PALS) Funding Assistance Application

About PALS:

Housed within the National Center for Smart Growth at the University of Maryland, PALS pairs faculty expertise to tackle sustainability issues facing Maryland Communities. Partnering with local, county, and statewide agencies, jurisdictions, and organizations, PALS creates customized coursework to target specific economic, environmental, and social sustainability challenges identified by the partner community. The collaborative university-community partnership delivers recommendations, strategies, and tools to address a community's most pressing challenges, providing a road map for creating sustainable, thriving places to live, work, and play.

Once a project is identified, the PALS team matches it with a UMD faculty member that wants to include the project as part of their curriculum for the semester. The PALS team, faculty sponsor, and the partner then work collaboratively to finalize a scope of work that both meets the need of the partner and provides the requirements of the class. With oversight and guidance from faculty, and data and input from the partner, students will work over the course of the semester to complete the project. Partners attend a kickoff meeting, mid-term check-in, and final presentation from the students. In between, they need to be available to provide the necessary data/resources for the project and answer questions from the students. At the end of the year, all PALS students present their work at the PALS Showcase – a poster session that is attended by students, faculty, and community partners.



Partnership for
Action Learning
in Sustainability

**Total Funding
Available:**
\$10,000

Application Due Date:
11:59 pm on Monday,
August 24, 2026

Recipient Notification:
Anticipated September
20, 2026

Eligible Applicants:
Municipal government,
non-profit 501(c)(3)
organizations, churches,
and other similar entities
with approval

**For More Information
Contact:**
Michelle Kokolis
PALS Program Director
mkokolis@umd.edu
301-405-3577

Since 2014, PALS has directed over 413 customized courses toward site-specific projects across the state, addressing issues of capacity building, economic and community development, environmental sustainability, health and wellness, and social resilience. Sample projects include:

- Wayfinding and Signage Plan for the Port Towns (Prince George's County Planning)
- Supporting Family and Small Farms in Prince George's County (Prince George's County Planning)
- Community Health & Built Environment Assessment: Asian American Neighborhoods (Prince George's County Planning)
- Cost-Benefit Analysis of Green Infrastructure at WMATA (Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority)
- Bioswale Rehabilitation Project (Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority)
- Safe Streets for Pedestrians Artwork (Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority; Art in Transit)
- Crafting Edmonston: A Co-Created Vision for a Sustainable Future (Town of Edmonston)
- Understanding Community Flood Communication Pathways Across Maryland (Town of Edmonston)
- Housing Policy Best Practices – Balancing Student Rentals and Owner Occupancy (City of College Park)
- Montgomery County Small Scale By-Right Housing for the R-60 Zone (Montgomery County Planning)
- Creative Site Design for Vera Cope Weinbach Park (Prince George's County Parks and Recreation)
- Building Community: Showing up for Social Change with Parkrun (College Park Parkrun)
- Accokeek – Land as Teacher (Accokeek Foundation)
- How Environmental Groups Can Address Social Needs in the Communities They Serve (Defensores de la Cuenca)
- Point Lookout - Landscaping and Infrastructure Response to Sea Level Rise (Maryland Department of Natural Resources)

The standard cost of a PALS project is \$10,000, paid by the community partner. Part of these funds cover the salary of PALS faculty and staff, and part of the funds cover all costs associated with the project, including, but not limited to, printing, transportation for students to attend meetings and site visits, community meetings, and any other supplies necessary for the project. This year, PALS is launching a funding assistance program.

This program is designed to make participation in the PALS program more attainable for municipalities, non-profit organizations, churches, and other similar organizations that would greatly benefit from participating in the PALS program but cannot afford the full \$10,000 fee. For this first funding cycle, PALS has \$10,000 available. These funds, which will be awarded through a competitive application and review process, will be used to complete one pro bono, or multiple reduced cost projects.

Application and Review Process:

- PALS has \$10,000 available to support pro bono / reduced cost projects. The number of projects selected will depend on whether the project(s) chosen will require full funding or partial funding.
- Applications are due by 11:59 pm on Monday, August 24.
- A PDF or Word copy of the applications should be emailed to pals@umd.edu with the subject line "PALS application." You will be notified that your application has been received.
- Late and incomplete applications will NOT be reviewed.
- After the application window closes, each application will be independently reviewed, using the scoring criteria provided with the application, by a panel of 3 reviewers.
- You may apply for full funding (\$10,000) or partial funding. ***Which you apply for does NOT impact your score.*** Your application will only be scored based on the completeness of your answers and the scoring criteria.
- All applicants will be notified of the outcome by September 21, 2026.
- *Please note: All applications will be reviewed to be completed during the Spring 2027 semester (January 27, 2027 - May 11, 2027). If your project must be completed before the Spring semester, please do not apply.*

Eligible Applicants:

Municipal government, non-profit (501c3) entity, or church. Other similar applicants will be considered if justified. If your organization type is not on this list, please contact the PALS Director, Michelle Kokolis at mkokolis@umd.edu to discuss.

Application Directions:

Please type your answers into the application as provided, keeping all of the original text in place. Applications should not exceed 5 pages in length, including the application questions. When proposing a project, keep in mind that PALS projects are incorporated into the syllabus for a class, and are typically completed by small groups of students (6-8) over the course of *one* semester. Most PALS classes are upper level (Junior/Senior)

or graduate students, but that is not always the case. If you feel that your project will take longer than one semester, please re-evaluate it to determine if it is a good fit for the PALS program or if it can be split into two, 1-semester projects. If you still feel it is a good fit, but really needs 2 semesters to be completed, please explain why in your project description. It is important that you answer the questions in as much detail as possible so that the review committee can accurately assess whether your project is going to be a good fit for a PALS class.

All applications will be evaluated according to the provided scoring criteria. It is advised that you review the scoring criteria before preparing your application. This will help you make sure that you are maximizing your points.

Incomplete applications and those received after the application window closes will not be reviewed.

Tips & Tricks:

- If your answer to any question is “No” or “N/A,” please type that as your answer - *Do not leave the answer to any question blank.*
- Be mindful of word limits - if a question says, “500 words or less,” please adhere to that limit.
- Application documents may be in the form of a word document or pdf.
- If you have questions about the application, or if you would like to discuss your project to make sure it is a good fit for the PALS program, please email the PALS Director, Michelle Kokolis, at mkokolis@umd.edu.
- Pro bono and reduced cost projects will be reviewed equally - your request has no impact on how your application will be reviewed. However, your application will be critiqued on how clearly and completely you answer the questions in the “Financial Need” section of the application.

Application

Please type your answers into the document below, keeping the original text in place.

A. Organization and Contact Information

1. Organization Name:
2. Organization Type:
 - ☐ Municipal Government
 - ☐ Non-Profit Organization
 - ☐ Church
 - ☐ Other (Please specify):
3. What is your organization's website? *If you do not have one, enter N/A.*
4. Who will be the primary point of contact for PALS staff, faculty, and students?
Name:
Title:
Email Address:
Phone Number:
5. Have you already discussed this project with a specific University of Maryland faculty member? If yes, please provide their name, department, and email address:
6. Have you previously worked on a PALS project with a faculty member? If yes, please provide their name, department, and email address:

B. Project Information

Scope

1. **Project Type:** What type of project is it? For example, research, design, data analysis, etc.?
2. **Project Location:** What is the location of the project? If your project will involve some sort of design work (such as developing a landscape architecture plan for a park) or will require a site visit, as opposed to a research-based question, please be as specific as possible.

3. **Project Description:** Please describe the challenge or problem that you would like UMD students to work on. What issue(s) or research question will your project address? How was the issue originally identified? What key contextual information should be considered? (500 words or less)
4. **Deliverables:** PALS courses typically produce a final report for each project. What other outputs do you expect from the students? (e.g., GIS maps, conceptual site designs, community brochures, policy recommendations). Are you looking for innovative, conceptual ideas, or technical accuracy?
5. **Alignment with the PALS Program:**
 - Why is this project a good fit for students in a university course to work on?
 - What hands-on learning experiences does this project offer for UMD students?
 - Are there specific technical skills, software knowledge, or subject matter expertise you believe students will need to successfully complete this project?

Data & Resources

1. What work, if any, has already been done to address this issue and how does this project build on that work?
2. What resources does your organization already possess regarding this project (e.g., data sets, GIS files, local master plans, past studies, maps, zoning codes, etc.). Can these materials be made available to the students by the first week of the semester (January 27, 2027)? If the data/resources will not be readily available, please explain why and when you anticipate them being accessible.
3. Will your staff be willing to introduce students to contacts, professionals, or local community stakeholders for research interviews if necessary?
4. What expenses or materials are expected to be needed to complete the project?

Community Context and Engagement

1. Who is the target audience, community, or population affected by this project?
2. Does this project require students to interact with the public (surveys, public workshops, events)? If so, how will your staff facilitate these interactions?

C. Staff Time Commitment

A successful PALS project requires consistent communication and guidance from the sponsor organization. Can your organization guarantee the necessary staff time to ensure the project runs smoothly?

1. How many people does your organization employ full-time? Part-time?
2. Are you available to collaborate with PALS staff and UMD faculty prior to the start of the semester to refine project deliverables and finalize a scope of work?
3. Can the designated point of contact commit to participating in three mandatory benchmark meetings (Kick-off, Midterm, and Final Presentation) and possibly weekly or bi-weekly check-ins if working with a student capstone team?
4. Are you able to respond quickly to emails from students, faculty, and PALS Staff to help keep the project moving forward smoothly and provide students with consistent, constructive feedback to improve the overall project outcome?
5. PALS hosts an annual Showcase at the end of the academic year in early May where students from both Fall and Spring semester projects present posters summarizing their work. Can your staff commit to attending this important event?
6. To help PALS continuously improve its community partnerships, can you agree to complete the brief feedback survey sent at the conclusion of the course?

D. Financial Need

The standard cost of a PALS project is \$10,000. Please address the questions below to help the committee evaluate your funding request:

1. What is your organization's annual operating budget?
 - ☐ Under \$500,000
 - ☐ \$500,000 - \$1 million
 - ☐ \$1 million - \$ 2 million
 - ☐ \$2 million - \$3 million
 - ☐ \$3 million - \$5 million
 - ☐ Over \$5 million

2. Is your organization able to partially cover the project costs? If so, how much can you contribute? Do you already have the money in-hand? If not, when do you anticipate having it?
3. How long has this specific issue impacted your community or organization, and what previous attempts have been made to fund it? What have been the primary roadblocks to success so far?
4. Describe the current budget limitations that prevent you from funding this project through your standard operating budget.
5. How does your organization intend to use the final student deliverables? What is the realistic timeline for their implementation?
6. What is the impact if this project cannot be undertaken due to a lack of funding?

Scoring Criteria

Threshold Criteria. The application must meet <i>all</i> these baseline requirements.		
The applicant is an eligible municipal government, non-profit, church, or other entity that has received application approval by the PALS program.	The project offers clear, hands-on learning experiences for university students.	The applicant has designated a point of contact and agreed to the staff time commitments.
Scoring Criteria (35 Points Total)		
Overall Application Quality Evaluates the general care and effort that was put into preparing the application.		
5 Points	The application is completed in full and free of errors (spelling, typos, etc.). It includes thoughtful answers that clearly explain the project scope, organizational capacity, and financial need.	
3 Points	The application is completed in full, but there are minor errors and/or questions that are not thoroughly or clearly answered.	
1 Point	The application is not completed in full, contains significant errors, and/or the questions are not clearly answered.	
Project Scope Evaluates the project description, desired deliverables, and its fit for a university class setting.		
5 Points	The project has a clearly defined design need, problem or research question, offers hands-on learning experiences, and the expected deliverables can be achieved within a 15-week semester timeline.	
3 Points	The project statement is clear, but the scope is either slightly too narrow for an entire course, or too broad for one semester, and requires refinement	
1 Point	The project is poorly defined or requests work that is of low educational value or minimal hands-on experience for	

	students OR the project is too complex/requires highly specific knowledge, skills, & abilities that students do not possess.
Operational Capacity & Staff Commitment Evaluates the client's ability to act as an active mentor and collaborative partner.	
5 Points	The organization guarantees pre-semester scoping collaboration, commits to all three mandatory benchmark meetings and agrees to potential weekly/bi-weekly check-ins, prompt responses to communication, and Showcase attendance.
3 Points	A point of contact is identified, but their capacity to manage weekly/bi-weekly check-ins or attend the annual Showcase is left uncertain or constrained.
1 Point	The organization appears too overburdened to commit to the necessary commitments and communication.
Readiness & Resource Accessibility Evaluates whether the student team can get started right away without delays.	
5 Points	The organization possesses baseline data and resources and guarantees they will be fully accessible to students by the first week of the semester. Staff are willing to connect students with colleagues, experts, or local stakeholders.
3 Points	Relevant data exists, but it may require administrative clearance, sorting, or formatting that would delay the students' work.
1 Point	Little to no baseline data or resources are available and students would have to start from scratch, making the deliverable timeline unrealistic.
Community Context & Public Engagement Evaluates how well the client understands their target audience and their capacity to effectively facilitate public interactions.	
5 Points	The target audience/population/community is clearly identified. If public interaction is required, the organization has a plan for how their staff will actively facilitate, publicize, or guide those public Interactions.

3 Points	Public interaction is required and the target audience is known, but there is limited ability or understanding of how to guide the students.
1 Point	The project requires significant public outreach, but the client provides no details on how their staff will facilitate student/community interactions.
Implementation Capacity Evaluates whether the student work will actively advance a community mission or sit unused.	
5 Points	The project is fundamental to the organization's ongoing operations, mission, or strategic plans. There are a realistic timeline and strong intent to implement the student deliverables in the near future.
3 Points	The organization wants to use the deliverables, but lacks a clear timeline, staff bandwidth, or a visible path forward to implementing the students' work.
1 Point	The path toward visible implementation is completely undefined.
Financial Need Evaluates the justification for full funding or fee reduction against the PALS budget.	
5 Points	The organization provides a detailed description of their budget limitations, demonstrates a notable impact if funding is denied, or provides a partial cost-share that maximizes efficient use of available PALS funds.
3 Points	Clear financial need, but requesting a full waiver when their operating budget or organizational size suggests an ability to contribute a partial cost-share.
1 Point	Budget limitations are vague or poorly justified.

Score Summary

- Overall Application Quality Score: _____ / 5
- Project Scope & Alignment Score: _____ / 5
- Operational Capacity Score: _____ / 5
- Readiness Score: _____ / 5
- Community Engagement Score: _____ / 5
- Implementation Capacity Score: _____ / 5
- Financial Need Score: _____ / 5

TOTAL APPLICATION SCORE: _____ / 35

Committee Funding Recommendation:

Approved:

Full PALS Funding: ☐

Partial Fee Reduction: ☐

Recommended Contribution: \$ _____

Deferred / Revise Scope: ☐ Meets threshold, but needs adjustments before matching with a course

Denied: ☐ Does not meet threshold criteria or score too low for course matching