Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for the Grand Challenge Initiative Request for Proposals (RFP)

Updated as of 12/08/25

Notes:

- *Submission instructions are now the first answer on page 1*
- *Questions added from the RFP Launch webinar on 10/21/25 begin on page 8.*
- *Questions based on the How to Create a 5-Year Vision webinar on 10/28/25 and the Leveraging the University Institutes webinar begin on page 15.*

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Will future RFPs be mostly the same so we can work on those now for the future? Will there be opportunities to revise and resubmit (based on anticipated feedback/response summaries from the reviewers) in following years, if each year's funding is treated as independent investments? 15

Should the proposal be specific to one of the six Solutions, or can the proposal cover multiple themes? 15

If a proposal is very good, but just wasn’t able to be funded, will the "basket" exist? This is a method by which the federal government “holds” good proposals to be picked up for funding during the next few years. These proposals would only need to be updated a bit, but a full proposal revision would not be needed. Will something like that exist in this case? 15

In order to go after a bigger science problem with a team, development of a specific tool (instrument, model, methodology, etc.) may usually be needed. Basically, to build a specific "capacity,” some research may be needed. Would this fit in the Small Catalyst? Isn’t it the idea of the GCI to enhance scholarship and research at Mason? 16

What do you recommend of the project size in terms of number of PIs? What is the average number you have seen so far? 16

The cultivating leadership component of the initiative could be read to favor senior faculty as lead of GCI proposals, particularly large ones. Will Junior faculty be penalized under this criterion or have a higher burden to demonstrate capacity? 16

Will steps be taken to ensure that there is equitable distribution of funded GCI projects across colleges at Mason? 16

Does a college's Budget Model position ("green" or "red") affect its ability to participate in the Grand Challenge Initiative (GCI)? 17

Could you provide more information on how specifically the institutes could support impact-driven research? 17

If someone is a lead on a proposal, can they be a team member on another proposal? 18

We understand that the Dean's commitment letter needs to be detailed. However, can the commitment letters from collaborators be boilerplate/single sentence structure like an NSF commitment letter or do those need to be detailed as well? 18

General

How do I submit my proposal?

Proposals are due no later than 11:59 PM EST February 2, 2026.

Proposals must be submitted using an internal proposal submission platform using the application submission link: https://gmu-limited-submissions.wizehive.app/program/grand-challenge-initiative-2026

The platform will open on Monday, December 15th.

Please note, this platform is the same platform used for limited submission opportunities. The platform requires all faculty wishing to submit proposals to set up a profile, which is quick and easy.

To learn how to access the new platform, set up a profile, and utilize this new platform, a training video can be found HERE. **Do not wait until the last minute to set up a profile. You can create a profile at any time on the platform by logging using the Mason SSO.**

ALSO, do not wait until the last minute to submit your proposal as the platform will close and LOCK YOU OUT at 11:59 PM on February 2nd.

As you will see when you access the Grand Challenge Initiative 2026 platform, each section of the application must be uploaded separately as a PDF or Excel file (budget template only).

I'm still unsure of how to approach this RFP. Where can I learn more?

- This website provides a high-level overview of the Grand Challenge Initiative and Grand Solutions.
- In addition, we will be holding the following community events:
- Town Hall and Q&A (Virtual) - October 21, 2025 [recording link] [Link to PPT presentation]
- How To Create a 5-Year Vision (Virtual) - October 28, 2025 [recording link] [Link to PPT presentation] [Link to Dr. Dirks' PPT]
- Leveraging the University Institutes (Virtual) - November 3, 2025 [Link to recording] [Link to PPT presentation]
- GCI Lightning Talks & Matchmaking Mixer (In-Person) - November 14, 2025 [RSVP for lightning talk registration and/or attendance here]
    - Note: Registration for lightning talks is due by 5 pm on October 30. Space is limited and may fill before this time.
- If you have additional questions, please email the Grand Challenge Initiative (GCI) team and a member of the team will get back to you by email or to set up a meeting.

Who is eligible to submit a proposal?

- All individuals currently allowed to submit proposals under Mason's Principal Investigators Policy 4012.

How many awards will be given and how much funding is available?

- We expect to make up to two Large Catalyst awards and up to five Small Catalyst awards.

Can proposals include collaborators from outside George Mason University?

- Yes, proposals can include collaborators from outside of George Mason University. The collaborations should be described in the proposal, and a letter of commitment should be included with the proposal as noted in the RFP. If the outside collaborators are providing support (in-kind support or funding), those should be noted in the Budget Justification but will not be considered matching funds.

Is there a limit to the number of proposals a person can be involved in?

- No, there is no limit to the number of proposals in which a person can be involved.

When and how should I engage with my dean or deans of other colleges?

- Individual team members should meet with their respective Deans or Associate Deans for Research as early as possible to determine whether there is support for the proposal and whether the proposal is aligned with the strategic priority for the academic unit(s). As noted in the RFP, all proposals require unit matching funds and, as such, there must be support from the Dean for the proposal. Letters of match support commitment from the Dean(s) or Administrative Unit heads detailing the unit match are required to be included in the proposal.

Can we apply for a Large Catalyst award without new tenure-line faculty hires?

- Yes, but the funding for an award without new tenure-line faculty hires is capped at $750,000 for up to 36 months. This is one-time money and is not renewable.

Can we apply for a Large Catalyst award for follow-on funding after receiving a Small Catalyst?

- No. These are distinct, one-time funding opportunities. Teams receiving Small Catalyst awards should describe how they will use those funds to catalyze additional funding to sustain the activities beyond the 18-month funding period.

- Both Large Catalyst and Small Catalyst proposals must include Sustainability Plans that describe how the activities funded by the GCI award and matching funds will be sustained beyond the funding period and catalyze a 5X investment growth in 10 years.

What support(s) will recipients receive?

- The Office of Research Innovation and Economic Impact (ORIEI) is prepared to provide various resources to the awardees. Each awardee will work closely with the appropriate university Institutes (ISE, IDIA, and/or IBI) to ensure that the team is connected across and outside of George Mason and has the transdisciplinary and partnership development support it needs to be successful. The Institutes will also provide support to the team by helping them explore additional funding opportunities to expand the impact of the GCI investment.
- ORIEI is also advancing a new initiative – funded in part by George Mason's Accelerating Research Translation award – focused on better enabling the translation of research into impact. Funded teams may work with the Research Impact team to consider all avenues for impact and to connect the awarded team to additional resources.
- ORIEI's Research Development Services office can also help teams identify opportunities for external funding and provide proposal development support as needed. ORIEI is also working with the central Advancement team to explore additional fundraising support for each award.
- Awarded teams may also receive additional support from the Graduate Division and the Office of Student Creative Activities and Research (OSCAR) for student involvement in the initiative. Teams are encouraged to consult with OSCAR and the Graduate Division about opportunities during proposal development as appropriate.

If I don't get funding, what happens next?

- The Research Development Services Team and university Institutes will be happy to meet with unfunded teams as appropriate to explore additional funding opportunities for the proposed activities.

Will there be another round of funding in future years?

- Yes. We expect to release future RFPs annually through 2029.

Will teams receive all the funding at the time of the award?

- No. Proposals must include budgets for each year of funding. Funding for each year will be released annually based on meeting the annual milestones and benchmarks described in the proposal. Annual reports noting annual activities, accomplishments, and milestones will need to be provided at the end of each annual period of performance.

What happened to the submissions to the RFI over the summer? Will I receive feedback?

- The Request for Transformative Ideas (RFI) submissions were analyzed and used to inform the structure of the RFP and related events. Feedback on specific proposals will not be shared with submitters.

What is the role of the Research Institutes (IBI, ISE, IDIA) in this RFP process?

- The Institute(s) will help by connecting with additional strategic partners and assisting the team to leverage GCI funds to secure additional funds for expanded impact. The research institutes will not be involved in any decision-making activities regarding which proposals will receive funding.
- Teams that choose to include one or more Institutes in their proposed activities will not be specifically favored in this competition. The Institutes stand ready to work with any of the funded teams and, as needed, assist unfunded teams (along with Research Development Services) in identifying external funding for their proposed activities.

Is there any additional funding available from OSCAR for the GCI specifically?

- OSCAR does not have any new set-aside funding available for GCI. The Summer Team Impact Projects (STIP) RFP is coming out late fall. Proposal submissions will be encouraged to align with GCI themes, so be on the lookout for that RFP. If undergraduates have questions on how the GCI impacts their research experience, or faculty want advice on including students in their CGI proposals, please reach out to Karen Lee at OSCAR.

Does this initiative create set-aside funding for graduate students and post-docs?

- There is no set aside funding specifically for graduate students or post-docs nor is any part of the Graduate Division's funding being set aside for the GCI. Teams are encouraged to include both graduate students and post-docs as appropriate for their project and to contact the Graduate Division regarding any support it can provide. The Graduate Division will continue to support non-GCI related activities as it has in the past.

Are proposals expected to align with the campaign priorities of George Mason and the colleges and departments involved in our proposal?

- Yes, proposals should align with existing campaign priorities or colleges, and departments should align their campaign priorities to include GCI-funded initiatives. The university's

government relations advocacy and advancement resources will also be aligned to support the GCI-funded initiatives.

What is meant by "transdisciplinary"?

- Transdisciplinary refers to an approach for addressing complex, real-world problems and developing solutions that involves integrating knowledge and methods from diverse disciplines and from non-academic stakeholders – such as decision makers or affected communities – in collaborative processes to co-create knowledge and co-design implementable, high-impact solutions. Transdisciplinary work transcends traditional disciplinary, practical, and epistemic boundaries by fostering mutual learning between scientists and practitioners and creating new conceptual frameworks for developing practical solutions to address society's grand challenges.

Is this RFP the only way to participate in the Grand Challenge Initiative?

- No, the university is leaning into these solutions areas in other ways beyond this funding opportunity. These include workshops and activities across all of Mason's campuses.

Requirements and Evaluation

Is it required to have more than one academic unit involved with your proposal?

- RFP submissions are not required to involve multiple academic units, but a transdisciplinary approach is a foundation of the Grand Challenge Initiative. That is, it is hard to imagine addressing any of the complex Grand Challenge Solutions from a single discipline's perspective. We encourage units to explore collaborations across departments, colleges, and schools.
- If proposals include more than one academic unit, the Deans from each college/school must determine how they will coordinate the required unit match among the participating units. Match Support Commitment letters from each Dean should describe this unit match support.

How will proposals be evaluated, and by whom?

- Each proposal will first be evaluated by external reviewers, including those with expertise in the Grand Challenge Solution areas. Final decisions will be made by the members of the President's Senior Leadership Team.

Will proposal writers be involved in any way with the selection of subject matter experts?

- We do not anticipate asking the proposal writers to identify subject matter experts.

Is it required to have student involvement in our proposed initiative?

- Student involvement in the proposed activities is highly encouraged. Undergraduate and graduate students are the life blood of the university and, as such, should be included to the great extent possible in all major initiatives.
- Teams are encouraged to consult or partner with OSCAR to support work with undergraduate students and potentially fund undergraduates involved in projects. OSCAR offers campus-wide support for grants with undergraduate student participants, including a series of seminars and trainings, a research or project assistant program, funding programs for student projects related to the grant, Celebrations of Student Scholarship three times per year where students present their work, a travel fund for students presenting their work off campus, and help recruiting students to work on projects. Any undergraduate student from any college or major who is enrolled at George Mason University can be supported by OSCAR's programs. OSCAR staff can work with individual PIs on their plans to include undergraduate students in funding proposals and to tailor support services for the students when the project is funded.
- Teams are also encouraged to consult or partner with the Graduate Division to support work with and possibly fund graduate students and post-doctoral fellows involved in projects. The Graduate Division offers a variety of services and staff can work with individual teams on their plans to include graduate students and post-doctoral fellows in funding proposals and to tailor support services for the students if the project is funded.

Are references required, and are they part of the page limits?

- References are not required but may be included if necessary. They should be on a separate document outside of the page limitations.

Is faculty support allowed? What about travel?

- Yes, both faculty support (summer salary, buying out AY time if allowed) and travel are allowed if needed to complete the activities proposed. All funding should be justified. As noted in the RFP, for the **Large Catalyst** award, there is an emphasis on proposing **NEW tenure-track faculty hires to expand George Mason's capabilities in the targeted solution areas.**

Do I have to use the metrics noted in the table in the RFP?

- Proposing teams must identify metrics that they believe are most appropriate for measuring the success of their proposed initiative and activities. The metrics provided in the table on page 3 of the RFP are illustrative examples, but proposals must include long-term metrics that demonstrate success across all three dimensions of transformative growth.

What do you mean by long-term and short-term metrics?

- See the RFP for a description of "long-term" and "short-term" metrics, along with examples. Long-term metrics should be identified early but measure success of your vision across all three dimensions of transformative growth over 5-10+ years, whereas short-term metrics should be able provide more immediate feedback on success of the funded activities (within the 2-4 year range).

When will we hear whether our proposal is funded or not?

- It is anticipated that funding decisions will be made in April and awards finalized by June 1, 2026.

Will feedback be provided to unsuccessful applicants?

- Yes, a written summary statement of the reviews received will be provided to each applicant.

Will proposals that align to multiple Solutions be prioritized?

- No, the reviewers will not be prioritizing proposals based on how many Solution(s) the initiative is aligned to.

Budget

Can external funding or donations be used for cost-share? What about in-kind?

- The cost share must be in the form of cash-match funding (specific org codes) from Mason academic (colleges or schools) or administrative units.
- In-kind contributions (e.g., access to specialized equipment, computing hours, partner consulting) are encouraged, but they will **not** meet the matching funding requirement. Applicant teams should note any additional contributions they are receiving or leveraging (e.g., OSCAR student support funding, graduate division support for stipends or tuition, external partner contributions) should be described in the budget justification. All contributions should be confirmed, but letters of commitment are optional.

Is there a cap on faculty salary or course buyout requests?

- Not with respect to the GCI, but faculty need to follow local academic unit or department guidelines.

Questions from 10/21/25 RFP Launch Webinar

Can you provide a link to the recording?

- https://coursemedia.gmu.edu/media/Grand+Challenge+Initiative+RFP+Town+Hall+and+QA/1_u48wrrqk

Matching Funds Questions:

Does the match requirement apply to both Small and Large Catalyst proposals?
Where can the match funding come from and when does it start to count, (e.g., NSF REU funding starting 6.1.2026), or industry collaboration funding to Mason for wages?
Can we get a match from external partners?
Does the Unit/Dept./College have to match in EACH category? (EX: GCI Travel: $5,000---->Unit Match: $5,000) or just the yearly total?
How will the Cost Match be tracked and reported on?
Can cash match come from an Endowed Fund?
If multiple colleges are involved, do all of the colleges have to participate in the fund matching? Taking off on the transdisciplinary focus, it seems that it's difficult to require one unit to chip in for the cash match if multiple units and colleges are involved. My understanding is that the PI's department will be the matching unit, but if it doesn't really benefit that much from this initiative because it's not granted to the unit, then I'm not sure the incentive. Please clarify whether the cash match can come from multiple colleges/units, and how?
Have the colleges already set aside funding to meet the cash match?

- The match requirement applies to both Small and Large Catalyst proposals.
- The cost share must be in the form of cash match funding (specific org codes) from Mason academic (colleges or schools) or administrative units.
- Externally funded projects, such as the NSF REU funding, do not count toward the match.
- In-kind contributions (e.g., access to specialized equipment, computing hours, partner consulting) and contributions from external partners are encouraged, but they will not meet the matching requirement. Applicant teams should describe any additional contributions they are receiving or leveraging (e.g., OSCAR student support funding, Graduate Division support for stipends or tuition, external partner contributions) in the budget justification to help us understand how teams are leveraging the Mason commitments to obtain additional external commitments (all of which contributes to the ROI). All external contributions should be confirmed, but letters of commitment are optional.
- Each category must be matched because the match is different for each category. For example:
    - GCI request for summer salary, 2 GRAs, and a Postdoc: (1:1 match) = GCI request of $50,000, unit match of $50,000 for a total budget of $100,000 for those costs

  - $10,000 in travel cost needed: (3:1 match) GCI request = $7,500 GCI; $2,500 unit match
  - $10,000 equipment: (3:1 match) = $7,500 GCI; $2,500 unit match
- The Dean's letter of match support commitment will include the Org/Fund codes for the match and at the time of the award, we will work with the Provost's office and the academic units to track the funds.
- With regard to an Endowed Fund, the team will need to check with the college or the Advancement Office to determine if funds from those accounts are allowed.
- If multiple colleges are involved in the proposal team, the team members should be coordinating with their ADRs or Deans (or Departments) to determine both alignment with college priorities and available funding for the match. Not every college has to provide matching funds. Colleges can work together to determine how much from each college is needed to meet the match requirement.
- There is no requirement that all of the match come from one academic unit or department, especially if there are multiple units involved. The matching funds can, absolutely, come from multiple units. The specific match and where (that is, from what unit) it is coming from should be described in the budget narrative and Dean's letter or letters of match support commitment.
- Faculty would need to ask their college about the funding available for the match.

Will cost sharing AY salary count as part of the cash match? (UPDATED)

- No. Academic Year (AY) E&G salary cannot be used for the match. However, units may propose paying summer salary to faculty and count that funding toward the match. Additionally, salary for staff who support the proposed GCI activities may be included as part of the match.

$15 million total is being distributed over 5 years (if I heard correctly). How much will be awarded in each round/first round?

- This is an annual RFP, but for the FY26 awards (as noted in the RFP) we expect to fund two Large Catalysts and up to five Small Catalyst award. Depending on the budgets proposed, more awards may be possible.

"Two Large Catalyst and up to five Small Catalyst grants" (from RFP) – this sounds very competitive, but a $15 million investment should allow for more awards?

- The initiative is $15 million *over 5 years* to include set aside funding for new faculty hires.
- This is the first annual RFP. We expect to release RFPs every year for each year of the initiative.

- We are not awarding $15 million in the first year.

Is this only for tenure-line faculty? Can term faculty apply as well?

The way the question was answered during the Q&A may not have addressed the original meaning of the question and so we have provided two answers:

If the question is asking who can apply, the answer below and in the RFP should address the question:

- All individuals currently allowed to submit proposals under Mason's Principal Investigators Policy 4012 are eligible to apply.

If the question was asking about the funding for faculty positions, the answer from the Q&A addresses that question:

- There are two types of funding available.
  The first type of funding is the one-time funding (up to $750,000 for Large Catalyst and up to $100,000 for Small Catalyst awards) which can be used for Talent/Personnel; Programming and Projects; and Infrastructure. This funding can be used to fund summer salary or course buy-outs for current faculty, term faculty, GRAs, postdocs, program managers or other staff, undergraduate students, etc.
  The second type of funding is set aside, permanent funding to hire tenure-line faculty. Term faculty cannot be hired with these funds.

How will proposals be submitted? Via email, via a separate form, etc.?

- We are considering two possible proposal submission processes. We are hoping to be able to use the internal proposal platform (NextZen) that is currently being used in some administrative and academic units. If we are unable to use that platform, we will provide guidance on how to submit proposals by email or upload. Specific guidance on how to submit the proposal will be included in an updated FAQ before December 10, 2025. Proposals will be accepted January 1 – February 2, 2026. Please email gci@gmu.edu if you want to submit your proposal before January 1, 2026.

Can you please elaborate on how to engage the college at this point?

- We recommend reaching out to your college Associate Dean for Research or Department Chair. The ISE, IDIA and IBI Executive Directors may also be able to assist you in making those connections. Please email gci@gmu.edu if you need assistance.

Is there a preference or requirement for multidisciplinary proposals?

- There is no "requirement" for multidisciplinary proposals. However, as noted in the original FAQs, a transdisciplinary approach is a foundation of the Grand Challenge Initiative. That is,

it is hard to imagine addressing any of the complex Grand Solutions from a single discipline's perspective. We encourage units to explore collaborations across departments, colleges, and schools.

Who will review the proposals? Also, how much do the reviewers want to see proposals built on already available expertise and resources at GMU and how much the proposals can build around bringing in new expertise and resources from outside (e.g., through new tenure-line faculty hires) to fill in missing resources or expertise?

- Each proposal will first be evaluated by external reviewers, including those with expertise in the Grand Solution areas. Final decisions will be made by the members of the President's Senior Leadership Team.
- The review criteria are noted in the RFP, and reviewers will frame their reviews around those criteria.
- Proposals should both build around Mason's current strengths and expertise and also propose funding for those areas where there is still a need to bring expertise to Mason. That is one of the primary reasons for the focus and set aside funding for new tenure-line faculty hiring.

Where can we go to see how ideas submitted over the summer fit into this approach? How do we know if our ideas can be a basis for a proposal for the current RFP?

- We received over 100 responses to the Request for Transformative Ideas. That request was designed to help the committee understand the broad scope of what individuals and teams consider a "transformative idea." While formal feedback will not be provided, the information obtained was invaluable in helping to shape the current RFP. If individuals and teams are interested in building out and submitting their ideas in response to this RFP, we encourage teams to speak with their college (Associate Deans for Research, Department Chairs, etc.) to determine if the idea aligns with the college priorities.

Is it required to have multiple colleges involved, even for the small awards?

- No. Cross college collaboration is encouraged, but it is not required.

Can you please clarify the difference between seed funding proposals and GCI small catalyst proposals? An example would be helpful.

- "Seed funding" is often used to collect preliminary data for a standard individual, investigator-initiated funding opportunity (perhaps from NIH or NSF).
- In contrast, with GCI funding for Small Catalyst award, teams should already be engaged in activity building toward a large, scalable opportunity, but need just a bit of funding for summer salary, course buy out, or to hire a program manager to help coordinate the additional engagement activities needed to get to that next step for Center Level type opportunity. These teams might not need the full funding of a Large Catalyst award, but enough funding to get you to the next phase.
- The goal of both the Large and Small Catalyst award is to build your team and build out your idea to be able to go after larger, scalable opportunities – one in a shorter period of time (Small Catalyst) and one in a more extended period of time (Large Catalyst). These activities are distinct from traditional seed funding to gather preliminary data or a pilot study.

Will it count against the applicant if they are already well funded, even if the small grant will help leverage the existing funding to achieve the next step in their goals for impact?

- No, it will not count against the applicant. The Small Catalyst funding is designed to help teams fund the specific activities needed to get the idea to the next level and unlock the catalytic growth and ROI noted in the RFP – that is, to fill the gap that unlocks the catalytic funding and activity.

I didn't see any funding categories for research studies. Should a research study or studies be a part of this to build partnerships (both internal and external), or are we expected to get different sources of funding for research studies?

- Again, the focus of the funding for these Catalyst awards is to build your team, build your concepts, and build your partnerships to be competitive for larger, scalable opportunities. It is not that research is completely off the table, it is just that the primary focus of these awards on building the team and partnerships needed to go after much larger funding and, as such, funding for a research study would need to make a compelling argument as to how that achieves the catalytic growth required for this funding.

Please quantify the “catalyze substantial growth over the next 10 years.” Would that be growth in Virginia and worldwide? Is that ROI or growth in the product or service to communities or both?

- ROI (Return on Investment) is monetary. How did you take the funding you received and grow that to be 5 times the original investment? We also recognize that, in addition to the return on investment, there will be other impacts from the funding in terms of contributing to the Grand Solution area and moving the needle toward a more peaceful, healthy, and prosperous future in Virginia and beyond. We also want teams to document the broad impact in terms of creativity and innovation and have those metrics measured as well. The ROI is based on follow on funding from a variety of sources, but other metrics of impact are also important.

The RFP under metrics it says "Social impact metrics (see FAQs)." Do you anticipate updating the FAQ to speak to social impact metrics? I didn't see anything there in the current version.

- We will continue to provide examples of societal impact metrics, but below are some examples based on an ASU guidebook: https://swcasc.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/2022-03/Meadow-Owen_Societal-Impacts_Guidebook.pdf
    - Instrumental applications – research/impact projects that result in tangible changes to plans, decisions, practices, or policies
    - Conceptual impacts – research/impact projects that contributed to changes in people’s knowledge about or awareness of an issue
    - Capacity building impacts – research/impact projects that contributed to the enhancement of skills, expertise, or resources of organizations or groups
    - Connectivity impacts – research/impact projects led to new or strengthened relationships, partnerships, or networks that endure beyond the project period of performance
    - Socio-environmental impacts – research/impact projects that led to changes in social and/or environmental systems, such as improvements to education metrics or improved biodiversity metrics in specific ecosystems
    - Economic impacts – research/impact projects that enhance local/regional economic development or prevent economic harms (including damage to or loss of lives, livelihoods, and infrastructure)

  While the guidebook is focused on climate resilience, these metrics can be applied to other domains.

Will future RFPs be mostly the same so we can work on those now for the future? Will there be opportunities to revise and resubmit (based on anticipated feedback/response summaries from the reviewers) in following years, if each year's funding is treated as independent investments?

- While we believe we will learn from this RFP and the responses we receive and will likely iterate a bit on the RFP, future RFPs should be very similar to this first RFP.
- We encourage teams interested in building their teams and doing some of the foundational work needed to submit a competitive proposal in the future, and we would be happy to assist teams in this work over the next year.
- Teams can revise and resubmit a proposal based on the feedback received.
- We also recognize that there will be very good proposals that we will not be able to fund. ORIEI's Research Development Services office is available to help teams also seek external funding, if appropriate, for some of the activities they are proposing.

Should the proposal be specific to one of the six Solutions, or can the proposal cover multiple themes?

- You should focus on the Grand Solution or Solutions that make sense for your proposed idea. There is no preconceived preference for proposals that address one Solution area or multiple Solution areas. We do know that there can be overlap, but you should focus on the area or areas that are most relevant to your idea.

If a proposal is very good, but just wasn't able to be funded, will the "basket" exist? This is a method by which the federal government "holds" good proposals to be picked up for funding during the next few years. These proposals would only need to be updated a bit, but a full proposal revision would not be needed. Will something like that exist in this case?

- Unlike what happens in the federal government, we do not expect to "hold" unfunded proposals in a "basket" for future funding.
- Part of the thinking here is that we would not expect the work done in preparation for the initial proposal to stop at the point of the proposal submission. We would expect the teams to continue to build on their concept and partnerships, and a revised proposal would include descriptions of that progress. There will not be a static basket of proposals that were not funded, but we expect that faculty and staff who worked on those proposals to take the time to make additional progress on their idea.
- As noted above, the Research Development Services office is also happy to work with unfunded groups to seek external funding for their activities beyond GCI.

In order to go after a bigger science problem with a team, development of a specific tool (instrument, model, methodology, etc.) may usually be needed. Basically, to build a specific "capacity," some research may be needed. Would this fit in the Small Catalyst? Isn't it the idea of the GCI to enhance scholarship and research at Mason?

- The goal of both the Large and the Small Catalysts awards is to propose something that gets the team to the catalytic growth needed to get the 5 times return on investment (whether that investment is large or small). For the Small Catalyst, you can think about it as: What is the one or two things you need to move you into position to obtain that additional funding? What is the capacity you are missing that the GCI funding gives you? What is the gap that you need to fill? What is the target you are building toward? It needs to be specific and scalable.

What do you recommend of the project size in terms of number of PIs? What is the average number you have seen so far?

- It is really up to the team in collaboration with their college(s) to determine the right size of the team. There is no recommended project team size.
- We do know that some teams are already being formed, and those teams vary greatly in size.

The cultivating leadership component of the initiative could be read to favor senior faculty as lead of GCI proposals, particularly large ones. Will Junior faculty be penalized under this criterion or have a higher burden to demonstrate capacity?

- No. The GCI is a great opportunity for early career faculty to get involved at multiple levels including PI and Co-PI. Also, there may be areas where there is not a senior faculty in that role, so an early career faculty could drive the proposal and also find a more senior faculty member to be a mentor. Our early career faculty come from many different experiences levels so it is the leadership experience, not a specific academic title, that is important.

Will steps be taken to ensure that there is equitable distribution of funded GCI projects across colleges at Mason?

- We are committed to an inclusive and equitable proposal submission process and opportunities for engagement to learn more about the GCI and connect with other faculty,

teams and administrative offices that can provide support. The proposals will be reviewed based on the review criteria and funded based on the merits of the proposed activities.

Does a college's Budget Model position ("green" or "red") affect its ability to participate in the Grand Challenge Initiative (GCI)?

- No. Colleges and schools in both "green" and "red" budget positions are encouraged to participate in—and even lead—GCI proposals. Additionally, they may request support from the Provost Investment Fund to meet the required cost-share for GCI proposals. Any GCI matching from the Provost Investment Fund would be limited to the performance period of the award.

Could you provide more information on how specifically the institutes could support impact-driven research?

- There are many ways to do this with you and the Institutes are interested in collaborating with you and learning more about your interest in impact-driven research.
- One way that we have supported others is facilitating transdisciplinary dialogues between potential users and potential researchers to grow your understanding of community partners' needs including what types of information are they using to make decisions and what potential actions they are taking. As we develop a better understanding of how research is being used and put into practice, we can design or co-design research agendas that are transdisciplinary in scope and scale.
- The Office of Research, Innovation and Economic Impact and the ISE are also building a variety of programs like Accelerating Research Translation (ART) to strengthen research application. The Office of Technology Transfer (OTT) is a great resource as well. The ART program is also engaging a working group learning more about how groups around Mason are furthering research impact and we will build upon these learnings and share best practices – how do you identify and build strategic partnerships. Each initiative will have different paths to impact. We are interested in having those dialogues with you.
- The Institutes can also help by connecting with external entities who are end users of what you're developing, or companies who are transferring research into industrial uses or products. There is an IDIA Industry Day on December 2, 2025, and it will be a great opportunity to showcase what we have to offer in terms of support for transformative research. Feel free to invite external partners to come and see Fuse and connect.
- Within the Innovation District in Prince William County (through IBI), in January 2026, we will be launching a series called the "Innovation Access Program." These will be taskforce type conversations where we will bring academia in to say "Here's our big problem" and bring people in across disciplines including industry to help solve the problem and create natural partnerships. Or, we will bring industry in and have them present their problems and small

businesses, faculty and students across different sectors will discuss how to solve the problems.
- All of our support is customizable, so we can help in many ways. But the impact pathway is really driven by the co-design with partners and users especially in the early stages but throughout the building of the research over time.

If someone is a lead on a proposal, can they be a team member on another proposal?

- Yes, a faculty member can be a lead on one proposal and a team member on a different proposal.

We understand that the Dean's commitment letter needs to be detailed. However, can the commitment letters from collaborators be boilerplate/single sentence structure like an NSF commitment letter or do those need to be detailed as well?

- There is no template for the letters from collaborators – either external or internal (e.g., Grad Division, Libraries, Institute, etc.), but it should be more than the single sentence NSF type letter. The optional additional commitment or collaboration letter(s) should provide a brief description about the nature of the collaboration. That is, it, how will the collaborator work with the team to advance the proposed activities. Please note, it should ***not*** be a "recommendation" letter. It should provide enough information about the nature of the collaboration for the reviewers to know what the collaborator has agreed to do.
- For internal collaborations, for example, if the team is planning to include the funding from the Grad Division (which is not considered a match, but is considered a collaboration) the team must speak with the Grad Division first and a letter describing that support would be good to include in the proposal.