



FY 2026 Request for Proposals (RFP)

Grand Challenge Initiative

Overview

As the university embarks on George Mason's [Grand Challenge Initiative \(GCI\)](#) to drive solutions to help secure a peaceful, healthy, and prosperous future, we are inviting proposals for investments in talent, programs and projects, and infrastructure that can have transformative impact on one or more of the [GCI Grand Solutions](#) *and* catalyze future funding and growth. The six Grand Challenge Solutions are rooted in the university's core strengths and reflect its deeply collaborative, transdisciplinary approach to research, education, and community partnerships. George Mason is committed to developing transformative solutions, maximizing strategic investments, and preparing the next generation of leaders to drive sustainable growth and impact forward. We are seeking investments to meet this unique moment to shape the future we want.

PLEASE NOTE: This Request for Proposals is NOT your standard seed funding proposal. It is a solicitation for a catalytic and transformative approach to addressing one or more of the six GCI Grand Solutions. Proposals need to articulate a bold vision for scalable and sustained impact and outline a clear work plan for how the GCI investments will be used to actualize the bold vision. **To this end, teams are strongly encouraged to coordinate with their Deans, ADRs, Chief Development Officers, and Chief Business Officers in the development of their proposals.**

Two types of proposals will be considered to allow for initiatives at different scales:

Small and Large

Small Catalyst – up to \$100,000 in GCI funds for 18 months

Small Catalyst grants can provide teams with the resources needed to catalyze transformative impact and substantial growth. This is one-time funding for catalytic activities and will not be renewed.

Large Catalyst – up to \$750,000 in GCI funds for up to 36 months, budgeted annually as appropriate for the proposed timeline and activities. This is one-time funding for catalytic activities and will not be renewed.

Large Catalyst awards can provide teams with the talent, programs, and infrastructure needed to make a transformative impact on one or more Grand Solutions and catalyze substantial growth over the next 10 years. An annual progress report will be required, and the release of annual funding will be based on achieving the proposed benchmarks and milestones.

A strong focus of the Large Catalyst award is on NEW tenure-line faculty hiring to expand the university's research and scholarship capacity in the targeted solution area(s). To that end, in addition to the \$750,000 in general GCI funds for each project, up to \$400,00 in additional GCI funds are available to support the hiring of *tenure-line* faculty (salary + fringe) for any given Large Catalyst proposal. **PLEASE NOTE:** All personnel costs must also include at least 1:1 local academic unit match. For example, if salary + fringe for a faculty member is \$200,000, a total of 4 faculty could be hired for a project with the 1:1 unit match. Funding for faculty (both central funding and unit match) is perpetual funding for the faculty position. Unit match for these positions must come from permanent, not one-time, funding.

NOTE: These budget limits are for the GCI Investment Request (exclusive of unit matches). Matching funds from academic/administrative units are required. See budget information below.



Funding

We expect to fund up to two Large Catalyst and up to five Small Catalyst grants.

Eligibility

All individuals currently allowed to submit proposals under [Mason's Principal Investigators Policy 4012](#) are eligible to apply.

Key Dates

Call for Proposals Released: October 15, 2025

Proposal Due Date: February 2, 2026 by 11:59 p.m.

Award Decisions: April 30, 2026

Funding begins: No later than June 1, 2026

The university intends to hold a GCI competition annually through 2029.

More information is available in the [FAQs document](#). In addition, we will be holding the following community events:

- Town Hall and Q&A (Virtual) - October 21, 2025 [[register via Zoom here](#)]
- How To Create a 5-Year Vision (Virtual) - October 28, 2025 [[register via Zoom here](#)]
- Leveraging the University Institutes (Virtual) - November 3, 2025 [[register via Zoom here](#)]
- GCI Matchmaking Event (In-Person) - November 14, 2025 [[RSVP for lightning talk registration and/or attendance here](#)]

To maximize the impact of proposed activities and ensure alignment with institutional priorities, prospective principal investigators (PIs) are encouraged to take full advantage of the university's research infrastructure and strategic support resources. By tapping into these resources, teams can accelerate progress, strengthen proposals, and amplify their contributions to both university goals and project outcomes.

Teams are encouraged to identify how their proposed initiative interfaces with one or more of the university institutes – [ISE](#), [IBI](#), [IDIA](#) – and be prepared to collaborate and engage with the institute(s) if the proposal is selected for funding. The proposal should include a paragraph discussing a plan for engagement with the institute(s) if the proposal is selected for funding. The institutes will help teams maximize their impact and accelerate progress. A virtual event is planned for November 3, 2025, to learn more about how to leverage the institutes' support.

Teams are encouraged to consult or partner with [OSCAR](#) to support work with undergraduate students and potentially fund undergraduates involved in projects. OSCAR staff can work with teams 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 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.

Program Goals:

The university's investments through the GCI are intended to catalyze transformative growth within our community to accelerate our ability to develop and deliver solutions to society's greatest challenges, which entail securing the future we want. We seek to fund transdisciplinary proposals that present a bold vision and feasible strategies that build on existing strengths and assets and leverage GCI investments to:

- Accelerate transformative growth across academic units;
- Enable research and/or research impact activities that generate solutions, put solutions into practice, and scale measurable impact;

- Create new or expand existing partnerships with businesses, nonprofit, government, and/or other organizations to enable scaled impact and/or secure substantial resources;
- Generate opportunities for faculty and students and enable transdisciplinary collaborations across academic units and with external partners.

The university will align resources around the awarded initiatives, including the university's Mason Now billion-dollar campaign and federal and state government relations, to help secure partnerships, external funding, and other support from government, industry, and other nongovernmental organizations.

Transformative Growth:

Transformative growth is a holistic, multifaceted evolution that profoundly enhances the university's impact on students, faculty and staff, the community, and the world at large. Accordingly, GCI proposals should discuss how their strategic vision will ultimately advance the following:

- **Transdisciplinary Research and Partnerships.** GCI investments should lead to sustained and significant research opportunities across disciplines and with external partners.
- **Transformative Growth and Impact.** GCI investments should catalyze transdisciplinary research and/or research translation activities that develop, translate, implement and/or otherwise put research into practice to achieve significant societal impact.
- **Research and Research Impact Engagement.** GCI investments should catalyze activities that increase the number of faculty, postdocs, graduate, and undergraduate students engaged in transdisciplinary research and/or research translation and impact activities.

GCI investments (including all matching funds) should ultimately lead to additional revenues (e.g., sponsored projects, philanthropic gifts, partnership contracts, etc.) for the proposed initiative that are cumulatively at least five times the original investment by year 10. *The proposals must demonstrate how they will achieve this growth.*

Overall Metrics of Success:

Proposals need to identify clear metrics that will be assessed to demonstrate the success of the proposed initiative in both the short-term (2-4 years) and long-term (5-10+ years). Metrics need to be tailored appropriately to the goals of the initiative and proposals must include how the chosen metrics directly relate to the three dimensions of transformative growth. The table below provides examples of relevant metrics that can be used to demonstrate overall transformative growth. Teams are encouraged to use some or all of these metrics and propose additional metrics that better demonstrate how the project will respond to grand challenges.

Transdisciplinary Research and Partnerships	Transformative Impact	Research and Research Impact Engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number, dollar amount, and quality* of funded external partnerships • Number and quality* of unfunded external partnerships • Number and quality* of collaborations across Mason units • Number and dollar amount of transdisciplinary proposals generated • Number and dollar amount of awards received 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commercial impact metrics (e.g., number of disclosures, patents, licenses, startups) • Social impact metrics (see FAQs) • Number of publications • Number of clinical trials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates engaged in transdisciplinary research and research impact activities • Percentage of faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates in participating departments engaged in research or research impact activities

*Partnership "quality" metrics could include assessing the levels of trust, engagement, and/or satisfaction in the partnership, performance metrics, or outcome metrics.



Submission Requirements

Responses must be prepared using 8.5"x11" page size with 1" margins, and single spaced using 11-point font (Arial, Calibri, or Times New Roman). The font size in graphics and budget template may be smaller but must be legible on the PRINTED page. Proposals must be submitted as a SINGLE PDF with a separate Excel budget file (prepared on the [provided Budget Template](#)).

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.

Requirements

This RFP invites transdisciplinary teams of faculty and staff to describe their approach to a transformative solution initiative that builds on George Mason's strengths and catalyzes future funding, growth, and impact. Cross-college collaboration is encouraged as appropriate.

PROPOSAL REQUIREMENTS

The proposal must include the following (please note the page limits for each):

A. Cover Page (1 page maximum)

Title

Team Lead (Name, Title, Affiliation(s), Email)

Team members (Names, Titles, Affiliation(s), Email)

Type of Funding

- ☐ Small Catalyst Award
- ☐ Large Catalyst Award

Which Grand Challenge Solution(s) is addressed (select all that apply)

- ☐ Advancing 21st-Century Education for All
- ☐ Building a Climate-Resilient Society
- ☐ Driving Responsible Digital Innovation and Sustainable Cyberinfrastructure
- ☐ Improving Human Health, Well-being, and Preparedness
- ☐ Pioneering Space Exploration, Research, and Collaboration for Humanity
- ☐ Strengthening Peace, Trust, and Engagement in Democracy

B. Abstract/Summary (1 page maximum)

This one-page abstract should summarize the bold vision, the transdisciplinary nature of the proposed initiative, the transformative impacts to be expected within the university and in society, and the strategic goals to be implemented with the GCI catalyst investments.

C. Solution Initiative Description (7 page maximum)

C.1 Bold Vision

- Describe the vision for this initiative. What does your initiative look like when it is fully implemented and has achieved sustainability?
- Discuss the transformative impacts your initiative will achieve toward advancing the aims of the GCI.
- Discuss how the proposed initiative will contribute to faculty, early career, postdoctoral researchers, graduate student, and undergraduate student success across multiple academic units.

C.2 Strategic Plan (Current State, Goals, Workplan, Timeline, and Metrics)

- Provide an overview of where your initiative stands today.
 - What specific strengths and assets will be leveraged?
 - What prior investments have already been made (if any) toward the proposed initiative?
 - What activities have already taken place toward achieving the long-term goals of the proposed initiative?
 - What gaps exist that need to be addressed to achieve the bold vision?
- Discuss your goals for the GCI investments (including matching funds). How will the GCI investments be used to move the initiative toward successfully achieving the bold vision?
- Define your work plan. Describe the specific activities that will be completed with GCI investments (and matching funds).
 - We strongly encourage new tenure-line faculty hires to be part of the workplan and included in the [budget](#). If new faculty positions are proposed, describe the focus of the position(s) to be created and how the new faculty will contribute to the overall success of the proposed work plan and initiative. The faculty hiring plan should be tightly coupled with the overall proposal narrative.
 - If other personnel are needed to implement the plan, describe the roles and responsibilities for each person.
 - Describe how faculty beyond the proposing team (especially early career faculty), postdocs, undergraduate and graduate students will be included in this work.
 - Discuss how the project will leverage existing partnerships and/or develop new partnerships inside and outside of the university. If applicable, describe how your idea is additive to and not duplicative of existing investments and programs.
- Define the metrics for success as noted above in the metrics section that you will gather. The proposal should describe how the metric data will be collected and reported.
- Define a clear timeline of work, milestones, and intermediate metrics and outcomes against which the initiative's annual progress will be evaluated to unlock subsequent year funding.

C.3 Leadership and Management Plan

- Describe the team leadership and management strategy that details the relevant experience and expertise of the team, essential project personnel, and other team members and strategies for substantive transdisciplinary engagement and collaboration.
- Proposals must contain evidence that the essential project personnel are able to provide the level of effort (and mentorship, where relevant) necessary to advance investment goals.
- Describe potential barriers for successful implementation and your plan to overcome them.

C.4 Sustainability Plan

- Describe your plans for achieving sustainability and growth beyond the initial funding period. The GCI funding (with the exception of NEW faculty hires) is one-time funding. The sustainability plan must describe how any proposed activities designed to continue beyond the award period of performance will be funded.
- In what ways does your idea catalyze additional growth in research and scholarship and potentially unlock additional funding to achieve the 5X investment growth? This funding can be in the form of externally funded large-scale programs, industry investment, philanthropic gifts, and new tuition revenue directly tied to the investment.

D. Budget and Budget Justification (3 page maximum)

Applicants must prepare a detailed budget using the [GCI Budget Template](#). The budget template must be submitted as an Excel file. The budget template includes two sections: GCI Budget Request and Internal Match Funds Committed. Teams must also provide a Budget Justification describing the GCI budget request and internal match funds in more detail.

Additional contributions, which could include any funds or in-kind contributions proposers are leveraging (e.g., external contributions, OSCAR student support, Graduate Division student support, access to specialized equipment, etc.), should be noted in the budget justification.

The budget may request funds in the following categories:

Talent (Requires a GCI : Local Academic or Administrative Unit match of 1:1)

For Large or Small Catalyst Proposal (Part of the \$100,000 or \$750,000 GCI budget)

- Current Faculty Salary (Buyout and Summer Salary)
- Summer Salary for New Tenure-Line Hires (*Large Catalyst only*)
- Program and Research Personnel
- Postdocs
- Graduate Students (GRA funding packages)

For Large Catalyst Proposals ONLY

- ***New Tenure-Line Faculty Hires (Additional Funding Available)***

Please note: All NEW proposed faculty should be identified on the budget template by selecting YES in the “Is This a New Faculty Line” drop down. As noted above, separate GCI funds (up to \$400,00 for **Salary + Fringe**) are available for new faculty hires. A minimum 1:1 match from the local academic unit is required for all new faculty hires. For example, if salary + fringe for a faculty member is \$200,000, a total of 4 faculty could be hired for a project with 1:1 unit match.

Programming/Projects (Requires a GCI : Local Academic or Administrative Unit match of 3:1)

- Convening conference, workshops, and other type of strategic planning activities
- Travel as needed to implement activities
- Consultants
- Materials, supplies, datasets

Infrastructure (Requires a GCI : Local Academic or Administrative Unit match of 3:1)

- Specialized equipment or instrumentation including any service contracts and installation costs for the equipment

E. Biosketches or Resumes (2 page maximum per person)

Include a biosketch or resume (in any format; two-page maximum) for all essential personnel. The same format should be used for all personnel.

For ***proposed new Tenure-Line or Research Faculty***, provide a one-page position description of the necessary qualifications of the position.

F. Dean’s or Administrative Unit Head Match Support Commitment Letter(s)

Proposals ***must*** include letters from all College or School Deans or Administrative Unit Heads who are providing cash match detailing the cash match provided by each unit. A template for the Dean/Administrative Unit Head letter will be provided.



G. Letters of Commitment

Letters of commitment may be submitted from partners providing additional contributions and/or supporting the investment in ways that are essential to its completion and/or sustainability. Up to 12 letters (maximum 1-page each) may be submitted.

BUDGET AND REPORTING

All requested direct costs will be permitted provided they are well-justified. This includes but is ***not*** limited to: support for partnership development, course buyout(s) or summer salary, costs for faculty hiring (e.g., cluster hiring or recruiting research track faculty), and instrument acquisition or development and maintenance.

Facilities and administrative (F&A) costs, also known as indirect costs, are NOT to be included.

Annual progress and final project reports will be required. Funding beyond Year 1 is not guaranteed and will be contingent on adequate progress (i.e., demonstrated progress toward stated goals).

REVIEW PROCESS AND CRITERIA

Process

The Office of Research Innovation and Economic Impact will engage reviewers to obtain scoring and initial review comments. Final decisions will be made by the senior leadership team. Award notifications are expected to be made by June 1, 2026.

Review Criteria

- Does the vision advance the goals of the GCI and move the needle on the proposed GCI solution area(s)?
- Is the proposal transformative?
 - Does it have the potential to catalyze future investment and growth to achieve a 5X investment in 10 years?
- Do the proposed strategies and tactics achieve the vision?
 - Are the timeline and benchmarks reasonable?
- Leadership and management
 - Does the proposed team have the expertise and experience to execute the strategic plan?
 - Is the team missing any key expertise or experience?
 - Is the project management plan comprehensive and sufficient to manage the proposed activities?
- Sustainability plan
 - Is the sustainability plan viable?
 - Does the sustainability plan address current and future funding and philanthropic landscapes?

Reviewers will also be asked to comment on why they believe this is or is not a good investment for George Mason.