Spark Funding Grants

Here and Next

FY 2026 Call for Proposals
Proposal Development Track
Convening Track

Dates and Deadlines

Informational Webinars	Friday, August 22 at 11 AM – Register Here Wednesday, January 14 at 2 PM – Register Here
Proposal Deadlines	Proposals are accepted during the academic year until funds are exhausted or until **May 15, 2026** for FY 26. New portals are released annually for new fiscal years.
Award Period	9 months maximum
Award Ceiling	$20,000 with smaller amounts encouraged. $20,000 awards are rare.

Program Scope

The Spark Funding: Research Development Grant supports collaborative ideation and grant-making for WashU faculty. Applicants should have a subject-matter focus at the intersection of **Public Health** and Global Health and the other priority areas of **Environmental Research, Digital Transformation,** or **Research Impacting the St. Louis Community.** Spark funds encourage a culture of multidisciplinary, convergent, team-based research by assisting teams in developing collaborative research agendas and preparing and submitting complex, large-scale proposals to external sponsors.

Please see the attached appendix for more information about the Fiscal Year 2026 priority areas to ensure that your proposal is competitive during this year's cycle.

There are two tracks of Spark Funding available to researchers: the **Convening Track** for projects in their nascent stages and the **Proposal Development Track**, for teams engaged in advanced planning for complex external grant submissions.

> **The Convening Track** helps teams turn their initial ideas into actionable plans. **Within a maximum of 9 months**, teams will create a conceptual deliverable, such as a white paper, funding roadmap, or concept note, to prepare for a larger research initiative focused on sustainability and targeted external funding. This grant is designed for planning and developing collaboration pathways, rather than functioning as direct project support. Convening funds should not be used in support of regular meetings of national professional organizations.

> **The Proposal Development Track** supports teams in the advanced planning necessary for successful external grant submissions, such as developing a compelling research vision, and securing buy-in from external collaborators and partners to demonstrate a track-record of robust teamwork amongst investigators across multiple disciplines. **This grant is not a general project support grant, if any funds are requested for research activities, you must explicitly connect them to the proposal's development and explain how they will**

be accomplished within the 9-month award period to enhance the proposal's competitiveness. Teams must submit a proposal by the end of the 9-month award period.

Eligibility

- Co-PIs must be full-time faculty at Washington University at the time of application and throughout the award period.
- There must be a tangible interdisciplinary collaboration from at least two Washington University schools (minimum of two Co-PIs with a primary appointment in different schools is required). Each collaborator should have salient research expertise that they are bringing to the team. Preference will be given to teams that include a primary or secondary appointment in the School for Public Health.
- Each applicant may submit one proposal as a Co-PI to each Here and Next Research Grant program for the Academic Year. They may not be a co-PI on more than one proposal per program or track (e.g., one convening and one proposal development proposal).
- Past award recipients must be up-to-date with all reporting requirements from previous awards to be eligible for new funding under the Here and Next program. It is the applicant's responsibility to justify their proposal's fit within the Here and Next Research Priority areas of Public Health, Global Health, Environmental Research, Digital Transformation, and Research Impacting the St. Louis Community.
- **Proposal Development Track applicants must have a single, targeted opportunity for which the team <u>is</u> applying, <u>not</u> a list of opportunities to which they could potentially apply.** The proposal must clearly articulate how Proposal Development funds will increase their likelihood of funding. For instance, connecting the proposed grant activities to the appropriate merit review criteria or based upon feedback received on a previously submitted external proposal would increase your proposal's competitiveness.
- **Proposal Development Track**: Washington University must be the prime awardee of the proposal under development. If WashU is a sub awardee, the prime institution must also be contributing funds to the proposal's development equal or surpassing that being requested from the Here and Next award.
- **Proposal Development Track** If the targeted opportunity requires an LOI and an invitation to full proposal, applicants must either have received that invitation to full proposal or explain in detail how they will pivot to another opportunity should they not be invited to submit a full proposal (i.e., specify the contingent opportunity and how the work proposed will still be relevant).
- **Proposal Development Track:** For limited submission or internal selection opportunities, applicants must have secured the institutional nomination or provide a detailed contingency plan for another specific opportunity if not selected. **Proposal Development Track**: If the sponsor requires an institutional match, the applicant must have secured the match or explain how they

intend to obtain it. Note that Proposal Development Grant funds from Spark Funding cannot be used as an institutional match.

Application Guidelines

General Tips and Guidelines

- All applications must be submitted via InfoReady. Applicants can assign a proxy to submit on their behalf.
- Each of the elements under Evaluation Criteria in this document should be clearly addressed in the applicant's responses.
- All responses should be written so that it is understandable and compelling to non-specialists. Avoid using jargon.
- While the research objectives and goals are important, the primary focus should be on how the proposed activities will enhance the team's chances of successfully submitting to an external sponsor.

Part I: Team Contact Information

- Enter the names, appointments, schools, departments, and emails of all Co-PIs
- Enter the name of the individual who would be the post-award administrator, if awarded
- **Track Selection**: Convening Track or Proposal Development Track (this selection will trigger the appropriate proposal questions)
  - **Proposal Development Track** What is the opportunity that you are targeting?
    - Targeted Submission Date
    - Provide a link to the solicitation. You may choose to upload the CFP/NOFO in the Optional Uploads section
    - Estimated Amount Requested from the External Sponsor
- **Amount Requested** Specify the amount you are requesting (note that maximum requests of $20,000 must be clearly justified)
- Indicate how your proposal aligns with the Here and Next Priority Areas

Convening Track: Part II: Team Ideation Activities and Collaboration

1. Describe the proposed initiative and the anticipated research output. Explain the goals and significance of the convening or team ideation session. What potential activities or targets do you plan to pursue after the initial period of performance. What activities do you propose undertaking during your convening? You may choose to present a short program or agenda for the initiative or convening as a supplemental upload.
2. How does the proposed Convening align with the Here and Next priority areas you selected? Detail the roles and responsibilities of each investigator involved in this proposal. Describe how the team was formed and discuss the role of innovation in your team's structure.

Proposal Development Track: Part II: Proposal Development Activities

1. Explain your proposed project and how it is aligned and competitive for the targeted opportunity selected.

2. What are the activities you plan to undertake with the Proposal Development funds? How will these activities move the needle towards your proposal's success with the sponsor?
3. Who is on the team and how does each member contribute to the proposal? What role will they play in proposal development and project execution? Include external collaborators and community stakeholders as appropriate.
4. Describe any communication with the targeted funding agency (communication with Program Officer, feedback on prior submissions, invitation to apply, etc.)

Part III: Budget & Budget Justification

List the top-line budget items for the Spark Funding Proposal. Explain those high-level expenses and their necessity to the team's progress in the justification. Please pay careful attention to what expenses are allowed for each track. Costs outside of the below may be considered if properly justified according to the aims of each track. Questions regarding budget can be directed to researchseedfunding@wustl.edu.

Proposal Development Allowable and Unallowable Costs

Allowable Costs	• Proposal/Project management • Grant writing and editing services • Mock Review, such as Red Team Review • Graphic Design and Scientific Illustration • Stakeholder outreach & engagement • Meeting and Collaboration costs (to develop the team's relationship with collaborators, program officers, etc.)
Unallowable Costs	• Project costs such as materials, data sets, equipment, etc., unless *extremely well justified* • Salary support • Postdoc, staff, and student support • Indirect Costs

Convening Track Allowable and Unallowable Costs

Allowable Costs	• Space and Facility rental • Travel, lodging, and meals for collaborators • Supply or equipment rentals for convening • Summer Salary for WashU researchers
Unallowable Costs	• Project costs such as materials, data sets, equipment, etc., unless *extremely well justified* • Salary support • Postdoc, staff, and student support • Indirect Costs

Part IV: Additional Information and Uploads

- Upload CVs for each co-PI, combined into a single .pdf file. Include only recent and relevant publications and research, no more than 4 pages per co-PI.

- Please list any current sources of funding for <u>this project</u> including pending opportunities both external and internal.
- Convening Track (optional): Uploads of agendas for convening and ideation sessions
- Proposal Development Track: (optional) Uploads of Solicitation Document – Materials uploaded other than CFPs will not be evaluated.

Evaluation Criteria

Convening Track Criteria

1. **Team Qualifications**
   The following should be explained clearly:
   a. the relevant experience and expertise of the co-PIs and the team's plans to grow the research capacity on the initiative's topic, including specific skills or abilities of the team
   b. the duties, roles, and responsibilities of the team participating on the initiative.
2. **Interdisciplinary Nature of the Team**
   At a minimum, two (2) schools must be represented by the co-PIs' primary appointments. Otherwise, proposals should clearly delineate the interdisciplinary, team-based approach that will be incorporated into the convening or ideation session. Pay close attention to explaining how your work—not just your team—is interdisciplinary. Each PI should bring something unique to the table. Draw attention to innovative, novel, and atypical collaborations that will break down previously siloed groups.
3. **Generative Capacity**
   There must be a clear deliverable that will be completed at the end of the period of performance such as a white paper, concept note, funding roadmap, etc. The proposed convening must have a clear plan to generate future research pathways. Proposals will be evaluated based on how they describe their hopeful trajectory.
4. **Significance of Proposed Research and Alignment with Here and Next Priority Areas**
   All applicants should discuss the alignment of the project's priorities, significance, and impact, as well as its potential impact on WashU research excellence, St. Louis, the region, or the globe. Applicants ideally should have a subject-matter focus at the intersection of **Public Health** and **Environmental Research, Digital Transformation,** or **Research Impacting the St. Louis Community.** Applicants must ensure that their proposals are free of discipline-specific jargon, and the initiative is clearly outlined

Proposal Development Track Criteria

1. **Team Composition vis-à-vis Targeted External Funding Opportunity**
   The team will be evaluated based upon the relevant experience, expertise, and capacity of the Co-PIs as it relates to the targeted grant opportunity. A clear description of plans to grow the grant-seeking capacity, including specific skills or abilities of the team and projected need for consultant services to ensure funding success is required.

2. **Interdisciplinary Nature of the Team and the Project**
   Two schools must be represented by the Co-PIs primary appointments at a minimum. In addition to school representation, the team must have a clearly delineated interdisciplinary team-based approach that will be incorporated into the resulting proposal's design and execution.
3. **Targeted Grant Opportunity**
   Must be working towards a **clearly identified large-scale grant opportunity** that is significant in the proposed field. An explicit strategy for securing external funding must be included. Proposals should include specific activities the team(s) will undertake to lead to an external funding proposal by the award period's end. A detailed description and timeline for proposal development process, from inception to submission is required. The feasibility of the plan to pursue external funding and the likelihood of a competitive proposal will be evaluated.
4. **Alignment with Here and Next Priority Areas**
   A concise discussion of the proposal's alignment with the Here and Next Research Excellence Priority Areas (see appendix). Applicants should also discuss the significance and impact of the proposed proposal/research upon WashU and/or the region for the targeted external funding opportunity.

Review Process & Timeline

Spark Funding proposals are accepted on a rolling basis during the academic year for as long as funds permit. Proposals will be reviewed by the Research Development Office, with feedback and approval from Provost's Office, based on the above criteria for each track. For **the Proposal Development Track**, **we expect these proposals to be time sensitive**. Thus, we will make every effort to deliver decisions within one month of submission. We hope to maintain a similar timeline for **Convening Track** proposals, but it may take a little bit longer. You will be notified as soon as a decision is made.

Reporting Requirements

Convening Track
A final fiscal and activity report will be due within 30 days of the award end via InfoReady. There will be a required follow-up report one year after the award period that will include questions about the group's status on their current research activities, proposal submissions, and collaborations.

Proposal Development Track
Awardees will need to submit a final report 30 days after the award period's end via InfoReady. This will include an upload of the submitted proposal that was the target of your submission. RDO will follow up with awardees regarding their external proposal's status.

Questions and More Information

For questions about this or other Here and Next Research Grants or InfoReady, please reach out to researchseedfunding@wustl.edu.

Addendum: Funding Priorities for FY2026

The Here and Next Seed Grant program is pleased to announce the FY26 focus areas supporting innovative and interdisciplinary research projects and initiatives focused on Public Health. To celebrate the launch of the new School of Public Health, we aim to catalyze collaborations across disciplines to drive population health research efforts to solve society's deepest challenges by capitalizing upon WashU's pre-existing strengths across schools.

> **Public Health** is what society does collectively to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy.
>
> **Population health science** is the study of the conditions that shape distributions of health within and across populations and of the mechanisms through which these conditions manifest in an individual's health. Essentially, population health science is the basic science of public health.
>
> **Public health** is then the applied practice of the **science of population health**. For instance, the science may study distribution of asthma in populations, public health then implements the programs and policies that address this distribution. Population health science may document the policies that effectively reduce pollutants, while public health then works with local partners to develop and implement policy change.

Thus, proposals should bring together researchers from multiple schools to develop adaptive solutions, transform health systems and policies, and explore multi-level influences on human health at a fundamentally interdisciplinary level.

2026 Research Focus:

We invite proposals from projects, teams, and initiatives in the following areas of interest:

- **Anticipating Global Health Changes:** Work that anticipates changes in the global health landscape and develops adaptive solutions grounded in WashU research strengths.

- **Digital Transformation:** Work that leverages digital technologies, data analytics, and emerging innovations to enhance public health outcomes and to address complex health challenges through interdisciplinary collaboration.

- **In St. Louis, for St. Louis:** Work dedicated to improving health outcomes and to addressing public health challenges specific to the St. Louis community, through locally-focused, community-engaged, and evidence-based interdisciplinary approaches.

- **Policy, Systems, and Solutions:** Work designed to improve public health through innovative policy and systems change at local, state, and federal levels.

- **Implementation Science:** Work that accelerates the adoption and implementation of evidence-based and sustainable solutions to diverse public health challenges.

- **Planetary Health:** Work that explores the intersections of environmental changes and human health, aiming to address public health challenges through sustainable and interdisciplinary approaches focused on environmental and planetary health.