



Spark Grant Program

Dates and Deadlines

Informational Webinars & Sessions	In-Person Info Session September 15 at 11 AM in Danforth University Center 276 – RSVP
	Fall Webinar • September 11 th at 11 AM • Register Spring Webinar • January 29 th at 11 AM • Register
Proposal Deadlines	ROLLING during the AY Proposals will be accepted during the academic year until May 14, 2027 or funds are exhausted ¹
Award Period	9 months max from award date
Award Ceiling	\$20,000 with smaller amounts encouraged. \$20,000 awards are rare and only granted in cases where the need is substantially justified.

Program Scope

The Spark Funding mechanism supports collaborative ideation and grant-making for WashU faculty who are engaged in cross-disciplinary, cross-school research with plans to submit competitive external research funding. 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.

There are two tracks of Spark Funding available to researchers depending on the stage of their team or initiative: 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 the 9-months award period**, teams will hold a convening that produces 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. Convening funds are not to be used in support of regular meetings of professional organizations.

Please note: This grant is designed for planning and developing collaboration pathways, rather than functioning as direct research/project or event support; there must be a subsequent pathway for work that eventually leads to external grant submissions.

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. It also can fund direct proposal

¹ The InfoReady portal will close if funds are exhausted.

development goals like red-team review, grant writing support, graphics development, etc.
Teams must submit a proposal by the end of the 9-month award period.

New for FY27

- **FY27 Topic of Strategic Interest +AI:**
Click here to read in full
- **Track Limits**
Faculty Co-PIs can only apply to **one** Spark Track per fiscal year.
- **Revised Proposal Narrative Questions**
The proposal narrative prompt has been changed from FY26 to FY27 to strengthen interdisciplinary review.

Eligibility & Submission Limits

- 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 and to the project at hand.
 - External collaborators/investigators are allowed, but they must be in addition to and complementary with the WashU collaborator. External collaborators can be both domestic and global. Personnel costs cannot be charged for external collaborators. See the **Budget** section on page 4 for more about allowable costs.
- Each faculty member may submit **one** Spark proposal as a Co-PI per the Academic Year, either Proposal Development Track **OR** Convening Track.
- Past award recipients must be up-to-date with all reporting requirements from previous WashU Research Seed Grants (Spark, Ignite, Transcend) to be eligible for new awards.

Proposal Development (PD) Track Eligibility

- **PD Track applicants must have a single, targeted opportunity for which the team is applying in the award's performance period (9 months), not 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.
- **In general, 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 Spark award. Please reach out to researchseedfunding@wustl.edu if you have any questions
- **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).
- **For limited submission or internal selection opportunities,** applicants must indicate that they have secured the institutional nomination or provide a detailed contingency plan for another specific opportunity if not selected.

- **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 matching funds.

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 and remember that we are not field-specific funding body!
- While the research objectives and goals are important for both tracks, **the submitted materials should above all demonstrate how the proposed activities will enhance the team's chances of successfully submitting to an external sponsor** (Proposal Development) or **how the current activities will prepare the team for eventual submissions once proof-of-concept**, etc., is demonstrated.

Part I: Team & Contact Information

- Enter the names, appointments, schools, departments, emails of all Co-PIs, and upload their Biosketch or CV. No more than 5 pages.
 - Note: We do not require biosketches to be certified; some have reported difficulty uploading a certified biosketch to the portal.
- Enter the name and email of the individual who would be the post-award administrator, if awarded. They will need to coordinate and/or provide us with the Project Journal Code where funds should be sent.
- **Track Selection:** Convening Track or Proposal Development Track (this selection will trigger the appropriate proposal questions).
- **Amount Requested** Specify the amount you are requesting (small dollar requests encouraged; all funds must be justified)

Part II: Convening Track: Team Ideation Activities and Collaboration

The questions below are a mix of short and long answer. We generally expect the responses to be brief and direct—please write for a generalist, non-specialist audience.

1. When do you plan to hold your convening?
2. Where will the convening be located?
3. **What is the research goal of the convening?**
 - a. Explain the significance of the convening and the research questions around which it is framed for a non-specialist, academic audience. Regarding the significance of the convening, we would like to know both the research-based significance **and** the significance for the team; how does this line of work advance, increase funding diversity, shift research trajectories, etc.
4. **Leadership & Researchers:** Who are the researchers driving this initiative/convening? What are their roles in championing this work?
5. **Who is being convened?** Who is participating in this convening outside of the leadership, and why? Explain the roles of the stakeholders at the convening and why this convening is needed to support the collaboration. Are they academic, community, industry, philanthropic, etc.?
6. **What are the activities planned for the convening?** In addition to explaining the activities and how they will advance the group's research aims, you can also upload a sample schedule, but it's optional.
7. **What is the expected output of the convening?** Explain how the convening will advance the research objectives of the initiative in the post-award period. What plans do you anticipate/hope to result from this convening?

8. **How will funds be used to support this convening?** Explain how you plan to use the funds and their necessity to moving your initiative/team forward as described.

Part II: Proposal Development Track: Proposal Development Activities

The questions are a mix of very short answer and dropdown to assist in ensuring a responsive reply time. In general, we expect brief responses. Please ensure your responses are written for a non-specialist reader.

1. What is the opportunity that you are targeting? List Sponsor, Funding Mechanism and any other information such as track or subprogram
2. Targeted Submission Date of proposal (must be within ~9 months)
3. Provide a link or upload to the solicitation you are targeting.
4. Estimated Amount Requested from the External Sponsor.
5. Is your targeted opportunity limited? (e.g., Does the sponsor require WashU to select who represents it as applicant?)
 - ☐ No, there is not an institutional limit.
 - ☐ Yes, and I/my team have been selected as WashU's applicant
 - ☐ Yes, it's limited, but I have not yet been selected as WashU's applicant.
 - Please explain **both** a) why you are applying for Spark Funds ahead of the institutional selection **and** b) how you would adapt these funds to submit another proposal if unsuccessful.
6. Does the opportunity require a competitive LOI?
 - ☐ No, there is no competitive pre-proposal submission phase for this proposal submission.
 - ☐ Yes, and I/my team have been invited to submit a full proposal by the sponsor.
 - ☐ Yes, there is a competitive pre-proposal, and I am either planning to submit the pre-proposal or have not yet heard from the sponsor whether we are invited to submit a full proposal.
 - Please explain **both** a) why you are applying for Spark Funds ahead of the sponsor's invitation selection **and** b) how you would adapt these funds to submit another proposal if unsuccessful.
7. Why are you targeting this funding opportunity? Please give a very high-level description of your project and its fitness for this funding opportunity. Please do not submit highly technical summaries of your proposed research.
8. 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?
9. 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.
10. Describe any communication with the targeted funding agency (communication with Program Officer, feedback on prior submissions, invitation to apply, etc.). If none, explain any plans to do so.

Part III: Budget & Budget Justification

Provide a high-level budget for the Spark Funding Proposal using the provided template (available in the InfoReady application portal). 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
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	- 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 <i>extremely well</i> justified - Faculty salary support - Postdoc, research staff, administrative 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 Danforth WashU researchers
Unallowable Costs	- Project costs such as materials, data sets, equipment, etc., unless <i>extremely well</i> justified - Administrative or staff support - Postdoc, research staff, and student support - Indirect Costs

Note to research/grant/financial administrators: As we are not an external sponsor, we do not require proposals to be submitted through RMS or to receive OSRS approval. What we prefer is a high-level budget that focuses on the necessity of those costs to the research project at hand that allows faculty reviewers to assess feasibility of the project, its timeline, etc. Please let us know if you have any questions by emailing researchseedfunding@wustl.edu.

Evaluation Criteria

Convening Track Criteria

1. Generative Capacity

Teams will be evaluated on the clarity of their research initiative’s aims and goals and the strength of the connection to proposed convening. There must be a clearly articulated deliverable that the team will complete at the end of the period of performance such as a white paper, concept note, funding roadmap, etc. Proposed activities should have a clear and explicit connection to the goals and aims of the team, group, or initiative.

2. Team Qualifications

Successful proposals will clearly explain why the research team is best poised to undertake and lead the work proposed. Clear statement of each researcher’s role and duties is a must. Connecting the aims and goals of the initiative to the relevant experience of the co-PIs is required. The team’s response should indicate how their research and capabilities will be leveraged in support of this work.

3. Innovative and Interdisciplinary Nature of the Team & Project

Beyond meeting the eligibility requirement of having leads from more than two schools, 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 both the work and the team are interdisciplinary and innovative.

4. Budget Justification

Proposals will be evaluated on the tangible impact of the funds as justified by the team. How clearly will the expenses listed enable the convening to be as impactful as possible.

Proposal Development Track Criteria

1. Effective Proposal Development Activities

The proposal responses must describe how the activities supported by PD Track funds advance the team's submission for a **clearly identified large-scale, competitive grant opportunity** (what qualifies as "large scale" will likely vary depending on field—the applicant should explain this in their response). Proposals should demonstrate how the specific activities the team(s) will undertake will advance their competitiveness for their targeted grant opportunity.

2. Rightness of Fit for the Selected Opportunity

The proposal should clearly articulate both why the team selected to pursue the selected funding opportunity and how their research meets the goals of the sponsor and/or the call for proposals, notice of funding opportunity, etc. Tying the teams' activities and research directions with program scope and review criteria connect will aid teams. 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.

3. 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.

4. Budget Justification

Proposals will be evaluated on the tangible impact of the funds as justified by the team. How clearly will the expenses listed enable the team to increase the quality and competitiveness of their large, competitive grant funding proposal.

Review Process & Timeline

Spark Funding proposals are accepted on a rolling basis during the academic year for as long as funds permit; if the InfoReady is still accepting applications, funds are still available! Proposals will be reviewed by the Research Development Office, with feedback and approval from the Provost Office/Vice Chancellor for Research, 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 or less of submission.

We hope to maintain a similar timeline for **Convening Track** proposals, but you can generally expect turn around between one month and six weeks after submission. 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.

No-Cost Extensions (NCE)

No-cost extensions are only allowed in extenuating circumstances and 60% of funds must be spent. To request an NCE, email researchseedfunding@wustl.edu with (a) a short description of the extenuating circumstances that necessitates an NCE; (b) the amount of funds left to be spent; (c) the plan to spend down the funds within the NCE period. We only grant NCEs for periods of 6 months after the award end.

Questions and More Information

For questions about this or other WashU Research Seed Grants or InfoReady, please reach out to researchseedfunding@wustl.edu.