Office of Research, Innovation, and Economic Impact
INSTITUTE FOR A SUSTAINABLE EARTH
George Mason University

OFFICE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CIVIC LEARNING
George Mason University

Creating Impactful Research Connections through Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE)

Call for Proposals

George Mason University's **Institute for a Sustainable Earth (ISE)** with support from the National Science Foundation's (NSF) Accelerating Research Translation (ART) program, and in collaboration with the **Office of Community Engagement and Civic Learning (CECiL)**, is inviting faculty to submit proposals to participate in the Creating Impactful Research Connections through Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) program. The CIRCLE program is designed to **support faculty seeking to scale up the impact of their research through community-engaged, experiential-learning curriculum.**

The goal of the CIRCLE program is to help faculty and student teams (1) develop a deep understanding of the value and use-contexts of their research beyond the academy, and (2) modify (or develop) an upper-level undergraduate and/or graduate course so that students can produce – through engagement with community-based partners – valuable information, useful data products, or other usable research-based outputs for those partners.

Who Can Apply?

Due to the nature of the funding source, proposals may only be submitted by a George Mason University faculty member with one of the following appointments:

1. Tenured
2. Tenure-track
3. Full-time, fixed-term instructional, research, or clinical faculty

Faculty who teach (or plan to teach) courses that focus on any of the following are especially encouraged to apply:

- Teaching students how to use novel tools, methods, models, datasets, and/or theories to support community-driven projects across Virginia;
- Partnering with communities, non-government organizations, businesses, or state and local governments to co-design and/or implement solutions;

- Teaching students to provide science-based, practical training or services to communities, organizations, or individuals.

Capstone courses that support student-driven (rather than partner-driven) projects and deliverables are not well-suited for this program.

Proposal Priorities

High quality proposals that align with **George Mason's Grand Challenge Initiative (GCI) Solutions** will be given priority. However, proposals **must also align with NSFs funding priorities and focus-areas**.

Competition Timeline

October 15, 2025 – Call for proposals published
November 17, 2025 – Proposals submission deadline
End of January, 2026 – Decision notification

CIRCLE Program Timeline

Spring Semester, 2026: Training and Preparation

To ensure teams are fully prepared for the summer discovery and development process, awardees will need to complete the following during the spring semester:

- Hire participating student(s);
- Complete training in community engagement, curriculum design, and research translation.
- Refine the initial value proposition for the student-developed deliverable, service, or outputs;
- Outline a basic teaching strategy, including any required and possible learning objectives and topics;
- Develop a substantial list of potential users/partners;

The initial value proposition, basic syllabus and potential deliverable will serve as drafts to iterate and refine throughout the summer discovery process so that the final course version is ready at the start of Fall semester.

Summer Semester, 2026: Community-Based Partnership Discovery and Course Development

CIRCLE teams will participate in a discovery process to better understand the partnership landscape through conversations with possible community-based partners. This process focuses on developing an understanding of what community-based partners find valuable and relationship building. Teams should speak with a minimum of 20 potential partners throughout the summer. These engagements will serve as the foundation for establishing partners for the course, and beyond, and will be instrumental in ensuring the course deliverable is useful and usable.

Discovery conversations can take place via online virtual calls, in-person site visits, and/or through other approaches (focus groups, peer-learning circles, outreach events, etc.). We strongly encourage at least 1 site visit or other engagement that enables faculty to spend time with prospective community-based partners. This will enable a more effective selection process and a better co-design experience once fully collaborating with a partner(s).

By the end of the discovery process, teams will have co-developed and honed a specific course and deliverable type that will provide a useful and usable artifact to a clearly identified set of partners and can be produced by students (with the guidance of the teaching team and community-based partner) within the confines of a replicable 1-semester course.

Before the start of the course taught in the 2026-27 academic year, at least one community-based partner will need to be secured – and the goals, deliverable expectations, and capacity for the partner to engage with the class need to be clearly and fully articulated, agreed upon by all parties, and approved by ART leadership.

All of these activities will be guided by mentorship from ISE/ART and CECiL staff throughout the summer.

Academic year 2025-2026: Teach the Course

CIRCLE teams must teach their newly (re)designed course involving at least one or more community-based partner(s) during the 2025-2026 academic year. CIRCLE teams will work with CECiL and relevant departmental entities to establish one of the appropriate Mason Impact course designations for the CIRCLE course. And the ART project evaluator

will work with participating faculty to assess the efficacy of the course for students and community partners.

Post CIRCLE Implementation

Upon completion of the CIRCLE program, participating faculty will be expected to continue teaching their CIRCLE course on a regular basis. ISE/ART and CECiL staff will provide consulting opportunities on an annual basis to support community outreach and engagement recommendations for CIRCLE courses. ISE/ART and CECiL staff may be available for additional consulting regarding updates to the community engagement strategy or partnership recommendations depending on time and availability.

The CIRCLE program is designed to ultimately reduce the effort needed to identify and secure community-based partners for future offerings of the course. Once the value proposition of the deliverable-type is well-defined for a specific set or type of community-based partners, partnership outreach can be targeted and will be more effective. Highly successful CIRCLE projects can result in having community-based partners actively seeking to engage with future course offerings.

Faculty should continue to connect with the ISE/ART and/or CECIL community engagement specialists annually to provide updates on their course partnership development, community use cases, and notable learning outcomes.

Student Involvement on CIRCLE Teams

Graduate Students: The project team *must* include at least one graduate research assistant (GRA) to assist in the discovery process and help develop the course curriculum during the summer.

Undergraduate Students: CIRCLE awardees may also nominate and work with up to two undergraduate students *funded separately* through the ARTISAN Internship program during the summer discovery process. The ARTISAN program is designed to connect and involve undergraduate students in research translation activities. Students participating in the ARTISAN program receive a holistic understanding of the research translation ecosystem and gain hands-on experience by participating in the development of research translation activities. Students will also receive compensation at $18/hour for their participation in the program and may not work more than 10 hours per week; inclusive of their participation in professional development and cohort-based activities provided by the program. Faculty

wishing to work with an undergraduate student in this capacity will receive further information about how to add an ARTISAN intern to the team after the CIRCLE award has been issued.

To Apply:

Faculty interested in participating in the CIRCLE Program must submit their proposal via email to Jessica Zelt (jzelt@gmu.edu) with the subject-line 'CIRCLE Proposal' by November 17, 2025.

The proposal must include the following information:

1. **Project Description.** Addresses the following points: (3 page maximum):

   Innovation. Describe the science-based deliverable that students will co-produce to support community-based partners in addressing a specific need.

   Community Need. Describe how the proposed deliverable could be valuable to what kinds of community-based partners. Discuss how you have determined that a community-based need for your proposed deliverable exists. If you have already engaged potential users or community-based partners in co-designing or testing the proposed deliverables, please discuss your methods and findings. Include a description of the types of community-based partners you think would be most interested in partnering for the course.

   Note. This value proposition will be explored and refined through the discovery process.

   Course. Identify an existing – or describe a newly approved – upper-level undergraduate and/or graduate level course that you will develop into your CIRCLE course. Describe the learning objectives for the course and discuss how the student development of the proposed deliverables will be integrated into your course. Please also note:
   - When you will next teach the course;
   - The frequency with which you teach the course on a regular basis;
   - Typical or expected enrollment numbers;
   - The majors of students who typically enroll in the course;
   - Any prerequisites; and

- How your course is currently situated within specific degree programs.

Personnel. Include brief biographical descriptions for the submitting faculty member(s), graduate student(s) you intend to include on your team (if known), and undergraduate students you would like to nominate for the ARTISAN program (if identified by name). Also discuss any other research translation activities or current community partnerships in which the submitting team members are engaged and/or would like to pursue further through this CIRCLE program.

2. **Course documentation**
   If you plan to modify an existing course, include a copy of the most recent syllabus for the course.

   If you plan to develop a newly approved course, include:
   a. The syllabus or a copy of the course proposal.
   b. Documentation that the course has been approved and will be taught in the 2026-27 academic year.

3. **Budget** (1 page maximum for budget justification)
   Applicants must submit a detailed budget and budget justification. Use the Office of Sponsored Project's RAMP Budget Tool to prepare the detailed budget and submit the excel file as part of the proposal package.

   Each team may request up to **$25,000 in direct expenses** to support their participation in the CIRCLE program. **Teams must have the ability to completely spend-down the award by the end of the term they teach their CIRCLE course.**

   The budget must include funding to support one graduate research assistant to support the summer discovery work. See student involvement above. This student should be identified by name in the project description and budget.

   The remainder of the funds may be used for faculty summer salary (within the limits allowed by NSF policy), additional student participants, travel for community site visits, and/or other expenses associated with the proposed CIRCLE work.

Project Reporting Requirements

To ensure the ART team can meet the reporting and evaluative requirements of the NSF cooperative agreement, CIRCLE awardees must:

- Provide a brief interim report that provides summative information about the project's activities and accomplishments to date in October or November 2026 (for inclusion in the ART Team's annual report to the NSF) and a brief final report at the conclusion of the project that provides summative information about the activities, accomplishments, and outcomes of the project.
- Engage with the ART project's external evaluator and/or respond to additional requests for information from the ART PI as needed.

Selection Process:

Reviewers will be asked to evaluate submitted proposals using the following criteria:

Community need for research outputs. What is the potential for the proposed deliverables to support or advance community development? How well does the project description demonstrate a community-based need for the deliverable? How well does the proposal identify and describe the community-based partners who will most benefit from the product or deliverable?

Curriculum integration and impact. Are the learning objectives for the CIRCLE course well-defined and relevant? Do these objectives clearly align with the development of the proposed deliverables? Is the proposed approach feasible within the given timeline and resources? To what extent will the proposed course enhance the experience of students at George Mason?