VCU Convergence Team Planning Grants

Purpose

The VCU Convergence Team Planning Grant Program is a competitive internal funding mechanism dedicated to catalyzing transdisciplinary research, interdisciplinary curriculum, and transformative learning at VCU in the five Convergence themes:

- Health Outcomes
- Human Factors of AI
- Neuroscience
- Mental Health
- Sustainability

It is designed to promote novel collaborations, enabling VCU to be a leader in addressing complex societal challenges, also known as "wicked problems." Funding is strictly reserved for projects that require partnership across different academic units and focus on societal challenges that defy single-discipline solutions.

Awardees agree to participate in a university-level workshop at the end of the funding period to share how they used the funds and how their results have seeded future plans.

What the planning grants will support

The Team Planning Grants are strategic investments intended to produce measurable outcomes in at least one of the three main pillars of VCU Convergence during the funding period:

- Transdisciplinary research. This can include but is not limited to launching partnerships that can seed external grants or supporting the creation of citable peer-reviewed research, scholarship, or creative inquiry across the disciplines.
- Interdisciplinary curriculum development. This can include creating or enhancing interdisciplinary team-taught undergraduate or graduate courses including general education, creating new credit programs (concentrations, minors, majors, certificates), or non-credit training or microcredentials. Details regarding revenue, headcount, and workload are negotiated on an individual basis and subject to dean and chair agreement.
- Transformative learning opportunities for students at any level. This can include vertically-integrated projects, service-learning, or undergraduate research. Proposals that include transformative learning opportunities should also include either transdisciplinary research or interdisciplinary curriculum development as a primary focus.

How proposals will be evaluated

Proposals will be evaluated upon the following criteria:

- **Internal Partnership Potential:** Ability to foster partnerships aligned with one or more VCU Convergence themes (i.e., Human Factors of AI, Health Outcomes, Sustainability, Neuroscience, and Mental Health), whether around fundamental or applied transdisciplinary research, interdisciplinary curriculum, or transformative learning.
- **External Collaboration Potential.** Intent to secure and involve eventual external collaborators (community organizations, governing bodies, professional societies, and/or commercial entities) during the funding period and beyond.
- **Shared Interests:** Evidence of a cohesive group of faculty united by a common intellectual interest.
- **Clarity of Outcomes:** Articulation of clear expected outcomes including a robust plan for sustaining or growing the work after the funding period

Overview

Full proposal deadline	April 30, 2026
Award state date and project period	July 1, 2026 - June 30, 2027
Award ceiling	Up to $10,000 per award
Funds release	Funds will be available to selected teams through the Office of the Provost.
Eligibility	- Proposals must include at least 3 full-time VCU faculty members from at least two different schools/colleges. Preference will be given to groups that contain members from multiple VCU campuses (MCV, MPC, or VCUArts Qatar). - Proposals may include staff along with a minimum of 3 faculty members. - Projects must demonstrate alignment with one of the VCU Convergence themes and (for sponsored research-focused proposals) one of OVPRI's SRPP Research Clusters, which reflect areas of high growth potential for VCU Convergence and high impact under the Research Strategic Priorities Plan.

Proposal Deadline

Application packages should be emailed to convergence@vcu.edu no later than 5 p.m. (EST) on April 30, 2026.

Application Requirements

- **Narrative** (up to 2 pages, no smaller than Arial 11-point font size, 1-inch margins and single spacing): A concise description outlining the shared intellectual interest and transdisciplinary commitments of the group, the specific question or problem the group intends to explore, and the unique qualifications of the proposed faculty group to engage with this area or address the identified issue. Specific details on planned activities, expected outcomes, and the group's transdisciplinary approach must be included.
- **Budget:** A proposed budget with justification, with confirmation that funds represent new investment and do not offset ongoing operational costs.
- **Core Faculty List:** A list of the core faculty members involved in the initiative, accompanied by a brief (maximum two-page) CV or biosketch for each.

Review Process

The review of submitted proposals will be facilitated by the Office of the Provost, Academic Affairs, and the VCU Convergence faculty theme leads. The aim of funded proposals is to represent VCU's deep but distributed expertise and to demonstrate how cross-unit partnerships can lead to novel approaches to addressing complex challenges.

Grantee Requirements

- Mid-project and final progress reports (2 pages, a template will be provided).
- Exploratory findings will be shared by each group at a future workshop hosted by VCU Convergence.
- Regular notifications to VCU Convergence of events related to this planning grant, such as seminars and workshops that are open to all faculty/staff.
- Agreement to respond to annual surveys regarding the impact of this planning grant for 3 years after the end of the funding period.

Budget Guidelines

All requested costs directly related to the projects should be listed and justified in the budget section of the application. Facilities and administrative (F&A or indirect) costs are not allowed. Faculty/staff salary support is also not allowed. See the Budgeting Guide below for additional information about eligible and ineligible costs.

Budgeting Guide

Category	Eligible Costs	Ineligible Costs
Meeting support	Cost of meeting venues, external speakers, food, and other meeting costs. Meetings can include, for example, faculty seminars, curriculum planning, town halls with community members, etc. Costs to enable community partner involvement (e.g., transportation, honorarium) are allowable Funds may also support a faculty learning community (FLC) offered through the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence	Meetings not strictly related to project
Equipment and supplies	Project supplies including materials to support pedagogical innovation	Office equipment and supplies not strictly related to the project
Travel	Conference travel or for site visits with a defined objective expressly related to the planned project	
Student support	Hourly compensation for a student for direct project work, with a detailed justification	Tuition

Pre-proposal Webinar

A pre-proposal information session will be held on March 17 at 1:00pm for interested persons who plan to respond to this announcement. A brief overview of this RFA will be provided, and there will be an opportunity to ask questions. Participation is encouraged, but not required. Please register in advance at this link.

Questions? Contact convergence@vcu.edu

Appendix

Evaluation Criteria

A. Internal Partnership Potential
- Does the proposal foster partnerships in intellectual areas related to VCU Convergence themes and (for research-focused proposals) one of OVPRI's SRPP Research Clusters?
- Is it creating a new intellectual synergy?

B. External Collaboration Potential
- Does the proposal include plans for external collaborators (community organizations and/or commercial entities) as appropriate to the nature of the project?
- Does the research team clarify how they will seek community voice and/or industry involvement in the development of the project?
- Do plans for external collaborators or input match the topic area?
- Do the research team and external collaborators share a vision for the project? Is there reciprocity in the outcomes and a sense of shared benefit?

C. Demonstration of Shared Interest
- Does the team consist of a cohesive group of faculty united by a common intellectual interest, eager to explore this shared interest?
- Does the proposal include at least 3 core participating faculty members from at least two different schools/colleges?

D. Clarity of Outcomes
- Does the proposal have a clear expected outcome(s)?
- Does the proposal have a robust plan for maintaining ongoing interactions, preparing joint applications, and/or developing products such as courses, collaborative research initiatives, or extra- or co-curricular activities?
- Are specific outcomes SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound)?

E. Feasibility & Planning
- Can the project be completed with the requested funds?
- Is the timeline realistic for a planning phase?
- Is there a clear schedule of meetings and identified lead organizers?
- Is there at least an initial sense of method and/or data to support the project's need?
- Is the budget logical?

F. Potential for Sustainability
- Is this a one-off event or the start of a long-term initiative?
- Are there concrete plans for future work (e.g., additional internal funding, external funding, a clear plan for next steps for curriculum development, or a strategy to integrate the team/outcomes into other projects)?

Scoring Matrix

Category	Points	Exemplary	Developing
Internal Partnership Potential	15	Clear ability to fosters partnerships in intellectual areas related to VCU Convergence themes and (for research-focused proposals) one of OVPRI's SRPP Research Clusters, demonstrated by a detailed plan of how the partnership will be developed	Demonstration of partnership development is not clear or measureable. Partnerships in intellectual areas **not** clearly related to VCU Convergence themes and (for research-focused proposals) one of OVPRI's SRPP Research Clusters.
External Collaboration Potential	15	Evidence of specific plans to engage external collaborators or receive their input. Plans for external collaborators match the topic area. There is a sense of shared benefit among partners or collaborators.	Vague plans related to external partners or potential partners. Partners do not match well with the topic area. There is no expressed sense of shared benefit.
Demonstration of Shared Interest	20	Includes at least 3 core participating faculty members from at least two different schools/colleges. Evidence of a cohesive group of faculty, as demonstrated by a description of existing interests and overlap among individuals.	Includes fewer than 3 core participating members; members are from one school/college (i.e., two departments within one college/school). Insufficient evidence of shared interests among team members.
Clarity of Outcomes	30	Outcomes are clear and SMART.	Outcomes and/or measurements are unclear.
Feasibility & Planning	10	Can be completed with realistic timelines and budget.	Scope is too big or too small for timeline and/or budget.
Potential for Sustainability	10	Clear evidence of a commitment to continue work with external collaborators.	Future plans are vague and unspecified.

Definitions

<u>Transdisciplinary research</u>: Transdisciplinary research stands on the premise that addressing wicked problems must bring together faculty, students, and community members across disciplinary and institutional boundaries to ask new questions and develop new methods to address society's more complex problems.

<u>Interdisciplinary curricula</u>: Interdisciplinary curriculum intentionally blends two or more academic disciplines to examine a central theme, issue, or problem. It is distinguished from multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinary teams by its emphasis on teaching individuals how to integrate insights from at least two disciplines. It includes instruction in interdisciplinary theory and methodology.

<u>Transformative learning</u>: Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 1991) is a process in which students critically examine and revise the underlying assumptions and frames of reference they use to make meaning, often after an experience that disrupts their expectations. At VCU, Transformative Learning occurs via high-impact experiential learning activities such as undergraduate research, internships, service learning, and project-based learning. These experiences are frequently interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary in nature and create especially strong conditions for transformative learning because they immerse students in hands-on, complex work with sustained effort, feedback, and structured reflection.

<u>Wicked problems:</u> Wicked problems are complex social problems whose boundaries, causes, and solutions cannot be definitively determined. They are characterized by uncertainty, interdependence among contributing factors, and competing stakeholder values. Unlike "tame" problems, which can be addressed through linear analysis and technical expertise, wicked problems are embedded within evolving social contexts in which proposed solutions alter the nature of the problem itself and often generate new difficulties. (See Rittel & Webber, 1973)

<u>External Collaborator:</u> External collaborator refers to any group or individuals with a unit of identity outside of VCU. Examples include community-focused organizations, non-profits, state agencies, or commercial businesses, among others.

Themes

Human Factors of Artificial Intelligence

AI is increasingly embedded in decision-making, education, healthcare and daily life. Research consistently highlights that the success and legitimacy of AI systems depend on human-centered design, ethical governance, trust and social context (Floridi et al., 2018; Shneiderman, 2020). This theme brings together technical, behavioral, ethical, educational and policy expertise to ensure that AI innovation is aligned with human-centered values and societal needs.

Health Outcomes

Health outcomes are shaped by interacting biomedical, behavioral, social, environmental and systemic factors. Research in population health and implementation science consistently demonstrates that meaningful, scalable improvements in health outcomes require integrated, community-engaged, health systems-level strategies rather than isolated interventions (Glasgow et al., 2012; Marmot et al., 2008).

Mental Health

Mental health addresses many complex areas through integrative, transdisciplinary research and innovation. Recognizing the influence of social determinants, Convergence Mental Health uses a comprehensive framework that considers socioeconomic conditions, education and community context, alongside cultural and geographic factors emphasized in global mental health. Rather than solely treating a person's individual mental health, the lab examines how biological regulation, relationships, institutions and social environments interact to shape well-being across the lifespan. This approach integrates place-based initiatives, neuroscience, behavioral science, data science and community-engaged practice. The initiative develops and evaluates scalable strategies that strengthen resilience, improves access to care. and supports participation in school, work and civic life.

Neuroscience

Advances in neuroscience increasingly demonstrate the interconnectedness of brain function, mental health, aging, and neurodegenerative conditions. Integrative approaches that bridge basic neuroscience, clinical research, and community contexts are essential for progress in prevention, intervention, and care (Insel & Cuthbert, 2015; National Institute on Aging, 2020).

Sustainability

Sustainability focuses on the stewardship of natural systems to ensure they can continue to support human health and flourishing for future generations. This theme emphasizes the interaction between human and environmental health, requiring transdisciplinary approaches that address conservation strategies, climate resilience or otherwise promote sustainable systems to address the escalating impact of human activity on the planet (Whitmee et al., 2015).

Citations

Floridi, L., Cowls, J., Beltrametti, M., et al. (2018). AI4People—An ethical framework for a good AI society. *Minds and Machines*, 28, 689–707.

Glasgow, R. E., Vinson, C., Chambers, D., et al. (2012). National Institutes of Health approaches to dissemination and implementation science. *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(7), 1274–1281.

Insel, T. R., & Cuthbert, B. N. (2015). Brain disorders? Precisely. *Science*, 348(6234), 499–500.

Marmot, M., Friel, S., Bell, R., et al. (2008). Closing the gap in a generation. *The Lancet*, 372(9650), 1661–1669.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning. University of Michigan Press.*

Rittel, H.W.J., & Webber, M. M. (1973). Dilemmas in a Theory of Planning. *Policy Sciences, 4(2), 155-169.*

Shneiderman, B. (2020). Human-centered artificial intelligence. *International Journal of Human–Computer Interaction*, 36(6), 495–504.

Whitmee, S., Haines, A., Beyrer, C., et al. (2015). Safeguarding human health in the Anthropocene epoch: Report of The Rockefeller Foundation–Lancet Commission on planetary health. *The Lancet*, *386*(10007), 1973-2028. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)60901-1