Call for Proposals for University Research Centers at American University

18 December 2019

American University’s Strategic Plan for 2019-23 contemplates establishment of several university-wide research centers that will highlight our institution’s distinctive areas of excellence, catalyze faculty productivity, make signature contributions to knowledge in the public interest, and enhance the reputation of the University. These Centers will generate state of the art investigations and implement innovative strategies of publication and communication to maximize the impact of their research beyond as well as within the boundaries of academe. They will draw on and create opportunities for collaboration among AU faculty, students and staff drawn from multiple disciplines, Schools and Colleges, and with researchers and institutional partners beyond the University.

Research centers, whether operating at a unit-level or on a campus-wide scale, have long been critical to AU’s knowledge-building mission. They will play an increasingly prominent role during the coming years, and University resources will be allocated strategically to enhance their capabilities and impact. The research enterprise advanced by AU faculty will thrive not only within but also outside Centers. Those efforts will be supported through multiple mechanisms, some of which already exist and others of which will be developed in keeping with our commitment to enhance administrative processes that are vital to the success of research articulated in the Strategic Plan. This request for proposals, however, has the specific purpose of identifying sub-sets of research activities that could best take place as part of a portfolio of university-wide centers drawing on intellectual and institutional resources drawn from multiple units across campus and organized on a central entity.

The Strategic Plan for 2019-23 identifies four thematic domains in which American University research will make important contributions, including health, data analytics, social equity and inclusion, and security. It is expected that University Centers will play a significant role in achieving this objective, and proposals from the AU community for work in these areas will be especially welcomed. American University’s definition of each of these domains is intended to be capacious, in part because we are determined for these initiatives to push the boundaries of conventional fields. They must go beyond what already exists, both on campus and outside of AU, even while they should build on existing strengths of the university and relevant domains of study. It is understood, as well, that some university-wide Centers may engage more than one of these four thematic realms and extend beyond them to encompass additional societal challenges and fields of inquiry.

Proposals for University Centers outside these priority areas are also possible: through this initiative AU is seeking compelling ideas that will enable us to make the most of our potential as an institution fostering transformative research. Our intention is to catalyze innovation and highlight our university’s role as a change-making institution. By inviting teams of faculty to articulate visions and concrete plans for launching University Centers, we seek to elicit ideas about how best to achieve this objective.

To that end, the Ad-Hoc Advisory Committee on Research and Centers (AACRC), on behalf of Provost Myers, issues this request for proposals for establishment of university-wide Centers. It is anticipated that applications submitted in response to this call will enable the university leadership to make crucial decisions regarding strategic investments in our research activities for the coming years. Proposals for entirely new initiatives are welcome, as are plans for the expansion of existing unit-based entities into campus-wide efforts and proposals for continued investment in the existing constellation of university
Centers. Seed funds will be provided to launch as many as three new Centers during 2020, and to sustain them for an initial period of incubation. Subsequently, a combination of grants, contracts, philanthropic donations and other revenue-generating activities will enable Centers supported through this mechanism to thrive. A reasonable expectation is that by the end of a three to five-year incubation period university-wide Centers will generate a minimum of $1 million per year in external funds.

Successful applications will make a compelling case for the importance of the substantive issues to be addressed by the proposed Center, and AU’s capacity to draw on expertise from multiple units on campus to develop and apply extraordinarily high-quality research to those concerns. Applications must argue convincingly that an effort undertaken across Schools and Colleges at AU would fill a distinctive niche given the existing national and international ecology of institutions engaged with their areas of inquiry. Successful proposals also will put forth ambitious strategies for maximizing visibility and impact of Center-sponsored work, and realistic accounts of the sources and levels of external support that can reasonably be expected to arise over the course of a three to five-year incubation period and subsequently.

While firm commitments of internal funding will be limited to an initial three to five-year period, it is imperative that proposals for University-wide Centers contemplate sustainability over a longer time horizon, which we notionally see as 10 years. A plausible configuration of staff, and the involvement of key personnel – including faculty, students and potentially outside fellows (including perhaps post-docs) and advisory groups internal and external to campus – should be outlined and explained in proposals, even while there is an expectation that precise allocation of responsibilities cannot be determined during the incubation phase of a new initiative.

The University is committed to providing core administrative support to maximize prospects for success of campus-wide Centers. To that end, efforts are underway to determine the contours of a central staff infrastructure that will include highly professional personnel charged with prospecting for external sources of support, proposal preparation and budget construction, post-award financial and accounting responsibilities, and implementation of communication and marketing strategies. A portion of indirect cost recovery secured through Center grants will be allocated to fund this staff support, with a significant percentage of those resources allocated to program development specific to the Center. Precise formulas for allocation of indirect costs remain to be determined. This is a focus of a planning process, spearheaded by the AACRC, that will be concluded by mid-2020.

While research will be central to the mission of university-wide Centers, some may also pursue additional activities, such as training of students or offering professional education opportunities in their areas of focus to constituencies in Washington or beyond. Some of those activities may be significant components of their plans for financial sustainability, and here again efforts will be made to supply the core staff infrastructure to ensure that we take maximum advantage of such opportunities.

Proposal instructions:

Proposal narratives should be a maximum of 25 single-spaced pages, no smaller than 11 point font and with standard margins. Figures and tables other than those included as appendices are included in the 25 page limit. Proposals must include the following components (we suggest here recommended pages per section, but emphasize that this is intended merely as guidance and is not ironclad):
1. Executive Summary (1 page)

2. Key issues to be addressed and rationale for their relevance to AU’s commitment to be recognized as a change-making institution. To the extent that the initiative engages one or more of the four research priority areas articulated in the Strategic Plan, this should be explained in this section of the proposal, which should also highlight empirical and theoretical puzzles to be prioritized by the proposed Center (3 pages)

3. Anticipated impact on scholarship and on society, specifying fields of inquiry and audiences (3 pages)

4. Disciplinary and methodological expertise to be mobilized by the proposed Center. This should address the range of Schools/Colleges and Departments that would be involved in the effort. An Appendix A may be provided consisting of supporting letters from as many as three American University Deans specifying how the proposed Center would strengthen their School/College and draw on their unit’s expertise to have impact in relevant fields (2 pages)

5. Potential partners beyond AU, in academe and beyond, and rationale for their engagement and the choice of these specific partners, understanding that others may be added as the Center evolves (2 pages)

6. Relationship to initiatives underway elsewhere, and more broadly situating the proposed Center in the institutional and intellectual ecology of efforts – across the United States and where relevant internationally – to address pertinent issues. What gaps will the Center fill in light of the existing constellation of programs in Universities, think tanks and knowledge producing entities elsewhere. Emphasis here will be placed on distinctiveness – on how the AU brand will be prominent – as well as on complementarity with programs existing elsewhere (3 pages)

7. Communication and Impact strategy – the full range of creative, scholarly and where relevant policy-focused products. (2 pages)

8. Leadership and governance, encompassing roles of a director, affiliated faculty, fellows, students and other relevant players, including outside board of friends/advisors, where pertinent. (1 page plus details to be provided in appendix B)

9. Envisioned sources and levels of external funding. At least a half dozen significant funding sources, with articulation of why securing these sources would appear highly plausible over the course of a 3-5 year start-up period. Architecture of a plausible funding model over the medium and long term, and narrative regarding how this could realistically be achieved, including the division of fundraising labor among key personnel. (3 pages plus Appendix C providing supporting evidence of likely support)

10. Combinations of supplementary activities, e.g. public fora, credit and non-credit training – whether fee-based or not – (2 page)
11. Staffing needs over an initial start-up period, and envisioned beyond; Application teams should include a plan that demonstrates how they will: 1) ensure recruitment, hiring, and retention of an excellent and diverse community of faculty, staff and research assistants, and 2) create an inclusive work environment that values diverse backgrounds and points of view (2 pages)

12. The range of participants – faculty, post-docs, fellows (both residential and non-residential), and/or students. Details on the strength of existing expertise, role of participants across the university, and priority expertise that might be added through recruitment of faculty, graduate student and staff. This could include recommendations for new faculty hires, including Center leadership over the medium-long term, with specification of faculty leadership during an initial launch period for the Center (2 pages)

Additional appendices that applicants may wish to include in their proposals:

A. One-page bios of up to 20 AU faculty or affiliates based at the University or elsewhere who would be central to the initiative. Memoranda (2-page maximum) from no more than 20 individuals from the faculty or relevant partner institutions indicating potential contributions of the Center to AU and beyond.

Evaluation Process and Criteria

Proposals will be evaluated by the AACRC, which will endeavor to gauge the likelihood that they will advance the Strategic Plan agenda of foregrounding change-making research at American University. The committee’s assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of proposals, and their fit with the objectives outlined above and in the Strategic Plan, will be conveyed to the Provost, who may consult with outside experts and/or seek clarifying information from applicants. Final selection decisions will be made jointly by the Provost and President and feedback regarding these decisions, including guidance for revision of the proposal for a subsequent round of consideration, will be delivered by the Vice Provost for Research.

Questions about components of proposals may be submitted to the AACRC (e-mail to vpor@american.edu) anytime through February 15, and will receive a response within a week, and to the extent possible more quickly. **Proposals will be due at the Office of Research (e-mail) by 5:00 p.m. on Monday, March 2, 2020, with announcements of successful proposals in early May.**