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GRI Pathfinder Groups

AY 2026-2027 Funding Cycle

Applications Open: January 15, 2026

Application Deadline: February 15, 2026, at 11:59 PM ET

Decisions Announced: March 2026

Orientation: April/May

First Cohort Meeting: September 2026

Program Duration: September 2026 - May 2027 (Academic Year)

About Pathfinder Groups

GRI anticipates sponsoring 3-4 Pathfinder cohorts in the 2026-2027 academic year. GRI's Pathfinder Groups bring together teams of faculty, staff, and students for a year-long exploration of "big questions" in critical issue areas ripe for applied collaborative research at William & Mary. These cohorts provide structured space for faculty and staff to develop new research directions, build upon existing research strengths, build collaborative partnerships, and design projects with potential for real-world impact and external funding.

Pathfinder Groups are discovery-oriented—they create space for intellectual exploration, relationship-building, and research development without the pressure of immediate deliverables. Through monthly seminars, engaging with visiting experts, field trips, and collaborative activities, participants refine research ideas, test approaches, and build foundations for future research proposals. GRI seeks to help faculty and staff identify other researchers on campus and provide the tools/training to write strong grant proposals that might help bring collaborative ideas into being.

What Makes Pathfinder Groups Distinctive

Pathfinder Groups are directly supported by a GRI Senior Research Manager, who will provide each group with organizational and logistical support. The process is anchored around monthly meetings that will be specifically designed to:

- Build research connections by breaking down organizational silos across campus

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- Engage students as research partners, giving them agency in setting the goals and agenda of the cohort
- Connect research to practice by grounding “big questions” in their practical context
- Create dedicated time for exploration, feedback from peers on early ideas, and feedback from GRI staff and visiting fellows.

A successful group might result in several viable research groupings, new lines of inquiry, grant proposals, or published work based on the efforts of the group.

Year-Long Journey

September–December: Foundation building

- Explore the thematic area through readings and discussion, including presentations of your own research in progress
- Guest speakers and visiting experts
- Begin developing collaborative research ideas
- Skills training workshops

January–March: Deep dive and design

- Intensive work on research concept development
- Practice presenting ideas for feedback
- Develop draft grant proposals for feedback
- Connect with potential external partners

April–May: Synthesis and launch

- Finalize concept papers or inquiries for future research
- Mini retreat in May to reflect, draft grant proposals, plan next steps
- Identify pathways forward (e.g. GRI Seed Funding, larger scale Accelerator Funding, external grant proposals, further collaboration among some or all of the pathfinder group members)

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Program Structure and Outputs

Cohort Composition

GRI anticipates sponsoring 3-4 Pathfinder cohorts in the 2026-2027 academic year. Each Pathfinder Group includes:

- 4-6 Faculty/Staff
 - Each cohort will have one or two faculty or staff facilitators who design monthly meetings with logistical support from a GRI Senior Research Manager.
- 3-4 Students (undergraduate and/or graduate)
 - Applicants may indicate in their applications any students they'd like to participate in their cohort
- Total: ~7-10 participants (if the members of the group wish to expand the size of the group once it is up and running, that is fine, but the GRI stipends will have already been committed to the original members of the group).

Both groups and individuals are invited to apply to create a Pathfinder Group, with preference given to group submissions. Researchers who have W&M colleagues interested in participating around a proposed topic/theme should apply as a group (max. six faculty). One faculty/staff member interested in facilitating the group should apply on the others' behalf, and indicate any co-facilitator.

Individuals with a proposed topic may seek like-minded collaborators by entering basic information about their topic [into this form](#). *Note, this is not your application.* However, in the absence of collaborators, individuals may also apply for membership in a Pathfinder cohort. If accepted, GRI will either group the individual with other researchers members interested in similar topics or work with the individual to find the right collaborators across campus. Whether your application is accepted or not, GRI will let you know who else across campus is interested in related themes/topics.

Flexible Deliverables

Members of the cohorts determine their own goals for next steps in their research. Examples might include:

- Concept papers outlining research directions
- Applications for GRI Seed Funding
- External grant proposals (NSF, NIH, foundations, etc.)
- Workshop or convening plans to advance the field
- Partnership proposals for research pilots with external organizations

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- Published articles in peer-reviewed or public-facing journals

Program Expectations

For Participants

| Engagement | Activities | Contribution |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|
| Attend and actively participate in all 9 monthly seminars | Engage with visiting experts | Co-author deliverables as appropriate |
| Engage with readings, prepare for discussions | Attend research development workshops | Share your networks and connections |
| Contribute your disciplinary expertise and perspective | Participate in GRI research-in-progress presentations. Present your own research and provide feedback to others | Support students in the cohort |
| Support collaborative research development | | Support peers' research development |

For Cohort Facilitators (if interested in serving as a facilitator can note in the application)

| Leadership | Logistics | Research Development | Communication |
|--|---|--|--|
| Design and facilitate 9 monthly seminars (with GRI staff support) | Work with GRI Research Manager on scheduling and planning | Guide cohort toward productive research directions | Keep GRI informed of cohort progress and needs |
| Create inclusive, engaging environment for all participants | Work with GRI Research Manager on selecting and inviting visiting experts | Support development of proposals or other deliverables | Submit brief end-of-year reflection on cohort outcomes and options on how to improve the program |
| Keep cohort on track to develop LOIs and other outputs you collectively agree upon | | | |

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Funding & Support

What Participants Receive

Stipends:

- Faculty/Staff Participants: \$1,000 each (facilitators receive \$1,500 each)
- Student Participants: \$500 each

Stipends recognize time commitment and sustained engagement and are paid at the conclusion of the program.

GRI Support:

- Dedicated Senior Research Manager supporting all cohort logistics and coordination
 - Full administrative support for all activities
 - Limited communications support, if the group has external communication opportunity
 - Meeting space and facilities
 - Research development coaching from GRI Director and the Director of Research
 - Grant development support for external proposals from GRI staff
 - Access to GRI networks and visiting experts
 - Integration into GRI community and resources
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Eligibility

Who Can Apply

Faculty/Researchers:

- All William & Mary faculty, postdocs, and staff are eligible to participate
- Applicants from any school, department, or discipline are welcome

Students:

- Students apply after themes are selected (separate process)
 - No specific prerequisites beyond intellectual curiosity and commitment
 - Faculty/staff cohort members will have manage student selection process
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Application Requirements

For Faculty/Staff Applicants

1. Application Form (through the GRI website)

- Basic information about applicant(s)
- Proposed theme/title to explore
- If applying as a group, submit one collective application
- Indication of interest in leading/facilitating

2. Proposal (maximum 2 pages, single-spaced, 11pt font minimum)

- Must address the sections below
- References/citations do not count toward page limit

3. CV (for each faculty/staff applicant, even if applying as a group)

- Focus on relevant experience and expertise
- Highlight research and collaboration that would be most relevant to this cohort
- Include teaching/mentorship experience

Proposal Guidances

Your 2-page proposal should address:

1. The Thematic Area & Why It Matters

What is the overarching question or problem area you would like to explore?

- Frame an issue area that could guide the cohort
- Describe the significance for research, policy, and/or practice
- Connect to broader societal challenges or opportunities—what's the potential real-world impact of research that might be conducted in this area?

Be ambitious but focused. The best themes are big enough to sustain 9 months of exploration but specific enough to generate actionable research directions. See some example themes below.

2. Intellectual Approach & Learning Journey

How might a cohort explore this question over the academic year?

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- What disciplinary perspectives are essential and/or useful?
- What key texts, debates, or frameworks could ground the exploration?
- What visiting experts or practitioners would enrich the cohort's learning?

Think of this as designing a high-level seminar, not a research project. Focus on exploration and development, not predetermined outcomes.

3. Pathway to Impact & Research Development

How might this exploration lead to meaningful research and real-world impact?

- What kinds of research projects might emerge from this cohort?
- Who are the practitioners, policymakers, or communities who would care about insights from this work?
- What does success look like by May 2027?

We're not asking for fully developed research proposals, but you should articulate how exploration could lead to fundable, impactful research.

Appendix

A. Selection Criteria

Proposals will be evaluated on:

| Criteria | Guiding Questions |
|------------------------------|---|
| Theme Quality & Significance | <p>Is this a compelling thematic area that matters within (and especially) beyond the ivory tower?</p> <p>Will this theme generate productive intellectual exchange and development?</p> <p>Is it an appropriate scope for year-long exploration?</p> |
| Impact & Research Potential | <p>Could this concept lead to significant research and external funding?</p> <p>Are external communities/practitioners/policymakers likely to care about this work?</p> |

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| | |
|----------------------|---|
| | If successful, could this concept ultimately lead to GRI Accelerate proposals or a major external grant? |
| Participant Capacity | Do applicants have relevant expertise for the theme? Do applicants have skills/experience in facilitation and collaboration? |