OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
CENTRAL

Clusters of Excellence

Request for Proposals

LOI Deadline: 9/30/2026 | **Proposal Deadline:** 12/04/2026 (extended)

Award Notification: By 01/22/2027 | **Grant Period:** 02/01/2027 – 06/30/2028

I. Purpose and Overview

Central Connecticut State University invites proposals for the next round of its Clusters of Excellence initiative, designed to bring together faculty expertise, student learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and external partnerships to address significant societal challenges.

Clusters of Excellence bring together faculty from traditionally distinct fields; engage students as active participants in hands-on, applied research, creative activity, and problem-solving; involve community, industry, governmental, educational, or nonprofit partners; and translate knowledge into solutions, practices, technologies, policies, creative works, or other forms of measurable impact.

The Clusters recognize that solving today's most significant challenges requires not only scientific and technological innovation, but also creativity and an understanding of people, history, culture, communication, ethics, behavior, institutions, and communities.

Through this initiative, Central seeks to:

- Build upon and connect areas of faculty expertise across disciplines, departments, colleges, and schools;
- Provide students with meaningful hands-on and applied learning experiences;
- Advance interdisciplinary research, scholarship, creative activity, and innovation;
- Strengthen partnerships with community, industry, governmental, educational, and nonprofit organizations;
- Generate tangible outcomes and measurable impact for Central, Connecticut, and the broader community; and
- Position interdisciplinary teams to pursue external funding and other opportunities that sustain and expand their work.

Projects may build upon existing research, scholarship, creative activity, educational initiatives, or external partnerships, or they may establish new interdisciplinary collaborations.

Defining Questions

Each Cluster of Excellence should be grounded in a set of defining questions:

- What significant societal challenge are we seeking to address?
- What disciplines and areas of expertise need to come together to address it?
- How will students actively participate through hands-on, applied learning?
- What community, industry, governmental, educational, or nonprofit partners should be engaged?
- What tangible outcomes or measurable impact could result?

These questions should guide both the development of the proposed Cluster and the activities undertaken during the award period.

II. Initial Clusters of Excellence

During the inaugural process, five areas of interdisciplinary strength and opportunity emerged from faculty proposals. These initial Clusters reflect faculty expertise and areas of opportunity identified through that process and are not intended to be static. They may evolve as societal challenges, faculty expertise, student interests, external partnerships, and funding opportunities change. Additional Clusters may emerge as new opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and impact are identified.

Each Cluster is intentionally broad and interdisciplinary. Faculty are encouraged to consider how their disciplinary expertise, both individually and in collaboration with colleagues from other fields, can contribute to understanding and addressing these challenges while creating meaningful applied learning opportunities for Central students and generating impact beyond the University.

Proposals should align with one or more of the following initial Clusters. Proposals that connect multiple Cluster areas are encouraged when appropriate.

- **Climate, Environmental Sustainability, and Community Resilience** brings together faculty, students, and external partners to address challenges related to climate change, energy, infrastructure, natural resources, environmental sustainability, and community resilience. Drawing on scientific, technological, social, economic, policy, and cultural perspectives, the Cluster examines the interconnected impacts of environmental change on ecosystems, communities, and society. Through applied research, community partnerships, field-based experiences, data analysis, policy

development, and other hands-on projects, faculty and students develop innovative and practical solutions that strengthen the capacity of communities and natural systems to adapt, respond, and thrive in an overall, rapidly changing world.

- **Economic Opportunity and Thriving Communities** brings together diverse disciplinary perspectives to examine the interconnected factors that shape the strength and well-being of individuals, families, and communities. Faculty and students work with municipalities, businesses, nonprofits, schools, and community organizations to address challenges related to economic opportunity, education, technology, housing, workforce development, career mobility, entrepreneurship, financial well-being, and community development. Through applied research, community engagement, and hands-on projects, the Cluster develops practical and innovative approaches that expand opportunity, strengthen communities, and contribute to inclusive and sustainable economic and social well-being.

- **Global Health** brings together diverse disciplinary perspectives to examine the interconnected factors that shape individual, community, and population health and well-being. Faculty and students address challenges related to health equity, access to care, behavioral and environmental health, healthy communities, pandemic preparedness, health communication, and the social and economic factors that influence health outcomes. Through applied research, clinical and community-based experiences, health education, creative and innovative approaches, and partnerships with community, governmental, educational, and healthcare organizations, the Cluster develops evidence-based solutions that improve health and well-being locally, nationally, and globally.

- **Industry 4.0, Cybersecurity, and Artificial Intelligence** brings together diverse disciplinary perspectives to explore how emerging technologies are transforming work, organizations, industries, communities, and society. Faculty and students examine the opportunities and challenges associated with artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, the Internet of Things, cloud computing, robotics, automation, and other emerging technologies, as well as their economic, ethical, educational, workforce, cultural, and societal implications. Through design of systems, applied research, hands-on projects, and collaboration with industry, government, educational, and community partners, the Cluster develops innovative and responsible approaches that strengthen Connecticut's workforce and economy, protect critical systems, improve organizations and communities, and harness technology to solve real-world problems.

- **Transformational Models in Education** brings together diverse disciplinary perspectives to explore how people learn, develop, and prepare to thrive in a rapidly changing world. Faculty and students examine challenges and opportunities related to learning and teaching across the lifespan, innovative pedagogy, artificial intelligence and educational technology, inclusive education, workforce and professional development, educational leadership, and evolving approaches to preparing educators

and other professionals. Through applied research, hands-on learning, and partnerships with schools, communities, employers, governmental agencies, and educational organizations, the Cluster develops, implements, and evaluates innovative approaches that increase engagement, expand opportunity, strengthen learning outcomes, and respond to evolving educational, societal, and workforce needs. Examining or adapting relevant educational models from outside the United States is encouraged.

III. Eligibility and Project Expectations

Clusters of Excellence are intended to support meaningful interdisciplinary collaboration rather than projects situated primarily within a single discipline or department.

Each grant will be awarded for the grant period of February 1, 2027 – June 30, 2028. Proposals should be written and budgeted for this grant period only. Subject to the availability of funds and satisfactory progress, projects may be considered for additional years for up to three years in total. To be considered for continued funding beyond the initial grant period, grantees will be required to submit a progress report, along with a new application and proposed budget for the subsequent grant period.

Project Teams

Each proposal must:

- Include faculty expertise from multiple disciplines, departments, colleges, and/or schools;
- Meaningfully engage Central students as participants in the work; and
- Include at least one external partner, such as a community organization, business or industry partner, governmental agency, educational institution, healthcare organization, or nonprofit organization.

Teams may also include Central staff and collaborators from other colleges, universities, research organizations, or other appropriate organizations. The proposal should clearly articulate the contribution of each discipline and partner and demonstrate how collaboration across areas of expertise strengthens the team's ability to address the identified challenge.

Student Applied Learning

Students must be active participants rather than solely beneficiaries of the proposed work. Depending upon the nature of the Cluster, student experiences may include faculty-mentored research, creative activity, community-engaged scholarship, fieldwork or clinical experiences, design or development projects, data collection and analysis, technology development, policy analysis, entrepreneurship, internships or work-based learning, or other forms of hands-on problem-solving and applied learning.

Sustainability and Growth

Clusters should demonstrate the potential to develop beyond the initial University investment. Proposals should identify appropriate opportunities for sustainability and growth, which may include external grants or sponsored funding, expanded external partnerships, curricular integration, institutionalization of successful activities, philanthropic support, or other mechanisms appropriate to the work.

IV. Proposal Format and Content

Proposals should be clear, concise, and written in language that can be readily understood by readers from a variety of academic disciplines. Please ensure that your full proposal includes:

- clearly defined deliverables; and
- a glossary of technical terms

Please organize your proposal as follows:

A. Cover Page/Cluster Overview

- Cluster/project title;
- Cluster of Excellence area(s) addressed;
- Lead faculty member(s);
- Participating faculty/staff and their departments or units;
- Anticipated student participation;
- External partner(s); and
- Dean(s) and/or Department Chairs (s) acknowledgment/sign-off.

B. Executive Summary — Maximum 1 Page

Provide a concise overview of the societal challenge or opportunity, interdisciplinary approach, role of students and external partners, primary activities, and anticipated outcomes and impact.

C. Proposal Narrative — Maximum 7 Pages

1. Challenge and Opportunity

What significant societal challenge or opportunity will the Cluster address? Why is the issue important, and how does it provide an opportunity for Central to make a meaningful contribution?

2. Interdisciplinary Collaboration

What disciplines and areas of expertise will come together? Describe the expertise of the team and explain how integrating these different perspectives strengthens the proposed work.

3. Student Applied Learning

How will Central students actively participate? Describe the hands-on experiences students will have and how their participation will contribute both to their learning and to the work of the Cluster.

4. External Engagement

What community, industry, governmental, educational, nonprofit, or other external partners will participate? Describe the role of the partner(s), how the collaboration will be mutually beneficial, and how partners will contribute to the proposed work.

5. Approach and Activities

Describe how the team will address the identified challenge, including the research, creative activity, applied scholarship, educational innovation, community engagement, technology development, or other approaches appropriate to the proposed work. Identify major activities and milestones.

6. Outcomes and Impact

Describe project deliverables by year, as applicable. What tangible outcomes or measurable impact are anticipated? Describe how the Cluster will determine whether it has been successful.

Outcomes may include student learning and participation; research publications and presentations; creative works; prototypes, technologies, or other innovations; policy or practice recommendations; community or organizational outcomes; new or expanded partnerships; curricular or academic program innovation; external grants or sponsored funding; and other discipline-appropriate measures of impact.

7. Sustainability and Growth

Please note that this grant funding is intended to be seed funding for projects with the potential to be sustained long-term after this initial funding has been exhausted. Please provide specific plans for how you envision that the Cluster could develop beyond the initial funding period. Identify potential external funding opportunities, partnerships, curricular connections, institutionalization strategies, or other mechanisms for sustaining and expanding the work.

D. Timeline

Provide a concise timeline identifying major activities, milestones, deliverables, and anticipated outcomes during the award period.

V. Funding, Available Resources, and Proposal Budget

Funding is intended to provide strategic support that enables interdisciplinary teams to launch, expand, or accelerate promising work.

Budget and Resource Request: Please provide an itemized budget and accompanying budget justification identifying anticipated costs and resources necessary to accomplish the proposed work. Include estimated amounts for each applicable expense category and explain how the requested funding will support the proposed activities and outcomes. Please use the following categories as applicable:

Personnel, including the following, as applicable:

Student and Staff Support
Funding may support undergraduate research assistants, graduate assistants, University Assistants, or other appropriate student/staff support. Proposals should explain anticipated responsibilities, qualifications or skills required, and how the experience will contribute to student learning, professional development, mentorship, and/or project outcomes.

Please note that while faculty are not prohibited from requesting release time or compensation, the intent of this grant is to prioritize funding for meaningful applied research and community engagement opportunities for students.

Fringe Benefit Rates
Please be sure to include the appropriate fringe benefit rates for all personnel line items included in your budget. You may contact the Grants and Funded Research Office for current rates.

Technology, Equipment, and Facilities

Proposals may request specialized technology, equipment, software, or other resources necessary for the proposed work. Priority may be given to projects that effectively leverage existing University facilities, laboratories, technology, and other resources.

Other Expenses

Proposals may request seed funding for activities such as pilot projects, fieldwork, materials, travel, specialized software, data acquisition, or other expenses necessary to initiate or advance the work.

Typical seed funding request: $25,000.
Funding for external partners is not allowable.

VI. Proposal Review and Selection

Proposals will be reviewed by a multidisciplinary committee. Reviewers will consider both the quality of the proposed work and its potential to advance the goals of the Clusters of Excellence initiative.

Criterion	Weight
Significance of the Societal Challenge and Potential Impact	20%
Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Integration of Expertise	20%
Student Hands-On and Applied Learning	20%
External Partnership and Engagement	15%
Innovation, Approach, and Feasibility	10%
Sustainability and Potential for External Funding/Growth	10%
Budget and Resource Justification	5%
Total	**100%**

Particular consideration will be given to proposals that demonstrate authentic integration across disciplines, provide meaningful roles for students, build mutually beneficial external partnerships, and have the potential to generate significant and sustainable impact.

VII. Submission and Timeline

- **Letter of Intent Deadline:** September 30, 2026 - Brief description of the proposed Cluster/project, participating disciplines, anticipated student involvement, and external partner(s).
- **Full Proposal Deadline:** **December 4, 2026 (extended)**
- **Award Notification:** By January 22, 2027
- **Grant Period:** February 1, 2027 – June 30, 2028
- **Submission:** Proposals should be submitted electronically in PDF format to the Office of Grants and Funded Research at CCSUgrants@ccsu.edu.

VIII. Post-Award Expectations

Awarded Clusters will be expected to:

- Engage students and external partners throughout the funded project;
- Participate in periodic opportunities to share progress and collaborate with other Clusters of Excellence;
- Submit an annual progress report documenting activities, student participation, expenditures, outcomes, external partnerships, and progress toward identified measures of impact;

- Present outcomes through a University-wide research, scholarship, creative activity, or applied-learning showcase or other appropriate venue;
- Pursue external funding, partnerships, or other appropriate mechanisms for sustaining and expanding successful work; and
- Identify opportunities to translate successful Cluster activities into continued research, creative activity, student experiences, community engagement, curricular innovation, or other sustained institutional impact.

Continuation funding, when available, will be based upon demonstrated progress, outcomes, appropriate use of resources, and a clear plan for continued development and sustainability.

IX. Contact Information

For additional information, questions, or assistance in developing a proposal, please contact:

Brenda D. Lopez
Grants and Funded Research Administrator
Central Connecticut State University
Davidson Hall, Room 212
Phone: 860-832-2366/b.lopez@ccsu.edu

Please note that applying for a Clusters of Excellence grant prohibits one from applying for a Next Generation grant.

We look forward to your innovative ideas and active participation in this critical endeavor to elevate Central's profile. Your engagement and scholarly excellence will be instrumental as we move toward enhancing the university's reputation for impactful research and community engagement.