2021 Call for Proposals: Translating CMU Insights into Policy Action
The Block Center for Technology and Society

About the Block Center

The Block Center for Technology and Society was established in 2018 through a generous gift from distinguished CMU alum Keith Block and his wife Suzanne Kelly. The Center seeks to translate CMU's world-class technological research and insights into societal benefit. More information on the Block Center, its mission, and its programs can be found here.

Each year, we invest in a portfolio of faculty-led projects that include early-stage applied research all the way through proven projects ready for public policy deployment and ultimately to larger-scale impact through external partners. In its first two years, the Center invested almost exclusively in early-stage research. This year, as projects mature and opportunities present themselves, we will invest in translating research insights into policy development and deployment through a new arm of the initiative called the Policy Seed Fund. We will also operate our traditional Research Seed fund to support early-stage research from CMU faculty.

2021 Block Center Research Seed Fund & Policy Fund

The Block Center is committed to funding interdisciplinary teams from across campus. In its first two years, the Center funded research by faculty in five of the seven colleges, including: Computer Science (19), Dietrich (6), Engineering (12), Heinz (8), and Tepper (13). These CMU-led teams have also included faculty from external academic partners, at Harvard University, MIT, the University of Texas, the University of Pittsburgh, and Dartmouth. In addition to funding, the Center provides access to data resources and government agencies. It has also convened policy forums and faculty briefings to Congress.

Each year, the Center’s fund focuses on pertinent societal issues, while retaining resources for other compelling research projects within the Center’s scope. Last year, the fund focused on research efforts that addressed the COVID-19 pandemic and issues of racial equity.

*With unprecedented levels of investment and policy change happening within state and federal governments, this year the Block Center aims to support faculty to translate research insights into policy action.*

The 2021 Block Center Policy and Research Funds will provide resources to faculty teams that have compelling research and strategies to influence areas of public investment and policymaking that align with the Block Center’s mission. In addition to financial support, this year the Center will put significant staffing resources into helping successful teams connect, convene and communicate their work to the appropriate policy audiences as part of the Policy Seed Fund component of the initiative. We will also retain a smaller portion of the fund for more traditional seed research that aligns with the Center’s focus areas.

We expect to fund roughly 5-8 policy projects and 3-4 traditional seed reach projects, each with a budget up to $75,000.
I. 2021 Policy Seed Fund Structure

A two-phase competition with policy and communication assistance and financial support provided by the Block Center to winning teams.

Phase I - Policy Development Process:

Teams will submit a two page proposal of their project, goals, target “policy customer” (e.g., agency, department, etc.) and strategy to advise or support their target agency.

Accepted projects will then have up to 12 weeks to obtain a letter of support from their target agency or policy customer indicating the project is mission-aligned and relevant. Phase II winners will be decided on a rolling basis upon receipt of the letter of support and supplemental documentation. We expect some projects to move swiftly to Phase II, while others will require the full 12 weeks. The Block Center will provide assistance to Phase I winners in obtaining support letters, though the scientific contribution will be developed by the faculty team and teams will be the lead contact to the target agency.

Phase I submissions will be evaluated based on four criteria:

1) Impact (both in terms of likelihood of success and size and scope of impact)
2) Composition and quality of team and research underlying the project (*Outcomes of previous research vs. fundamental new research is ideal for policy projects)
3) Alignment with Block Center research priorities and policy expertise/connections
4) Ethical implications of the project

Applicants’ two page proposal should clearly answer the following questions:

- What is the target policy outcome of project?
- Which elements of the team's expertise are particularly relevant for this project?
- How does the team plan to translate their insights and recommendations to their target audience (e.g., white papers, convenings, existing connections)?
- How does the team plan to realistically develop findings within the academic year?

Phase II: Policy Deployment

Teams that receive a letter of support will be expected to develop their proposals into a more detailed document that can be reviewed by both the Block Center team and their target external policy partner. These documents will be made public.

Phase II winners will be eligible for:

- Financial support of up to $75,000. These funds could be used to support research activities, engagement with policymakers, or the translation of research results into policy-relevant materials. Examples of approved expenditures include Ph.D. student support, memo writing, and convenings of researchers and policymakers.
- A policy expert in the team’s focus area to help develop memos and strategies for policy impact
- A communication liaison to help coordinate convenings and media and policy collateral
Phase II proposals will be evaluated based on four criteria:

1) **The ability to influence significant new or existing state and federal resources to address a social issue**
The goal of this year’s seed fund is to translate CMU insights into policy outcomes through targeted policymaking. Examples may include (but are not limited to): new technical solutions that improve an agency’s ability to equitably distribute public benefits, recommendations for investments into workforce development, or a series of roundtables or white papers to inform clean energy investments. Successful proposals should also clearly articulate target opportunities and realistic outcomes, as well as research and non-research activities that will motivate those outcomes. This might include roundtables and convenings, policy white papers, and new empirical insights that can inspire new ways to think about social problems in the immediate term. While the Block Center will help teams connect with federal agencies, teams with existing connections through prior work are strongly encouraged.

2) **Team composition and scientific merit of the project or activity**
Proposal should clearly articulate the scientific validation of the proposed activities. This does not mean funded projects need to pursue new fundamental research, leveraging the team’s previous work to improve policy outcomes is appropriate and highly encouraged. As the goal is to inform policymaking within the academic year, it is unlikely teams will be able to pursue new research that culminates into recommendations in that timeframe. However, it is essential that the ultimate policy advice, strategies, or activities are validated by the team’s expertise and work.

3) **Budgets that creatively and appropriately align with goals**
Project budgets should reflect what is necessary to best partner and inform significant policy outcomes. Some projects may need a small portion of the maximum amount, for roundtables or other virtual and physical convenings. Others may need policy connection and writing support from the Block Center more than financial support. Successful applicants will clearly articulate what financial and non-financial support is needed to meet the team’s ultimate goals.

4) **The ethical implications of the project**
A core value to the Block Center is the ethical use of technology. As such, we are interested in supporting faculty that have clearly thought about the ethical implications of their work and potential biases either in the research team, methods, or outcomes of the project.

**Timeline for Policy Seed Fund**

*August 27* – Two page project descriptions due  
*September 10* – Phase I winners announced  
*September 22* – Phase I winners full cohort kickoff meeting  
*Rolling up to December 10* – Letter of support from target agency and Phase II application documents due  
*December 20* – Phase Two winners announced
II. 2021 Research Seed Fund Structure

In addition to our new Policy Seed Fund, we will reserve resources for traditional research projects that clearly articulate societal value and alignment with the Block Center’s strategic priorities as part of the 2021 Research Seed Fund. These will be evaluated similarly to the policy projects, but without the clear, near-term policy partner. The expectation is that the seed-funded faculty will need to conduct research to get to the point where they could later become policy projects at the Center. Seed projects will be evaluated based on: **Team expertise and scientific merit; societal impact; and ethical consideration.**

Seed-funded research projects should demonstrate a strong alignment with the research goals of at least one of the three main thrusts of the Block Center: the Future of Work, Artificial Intelligence and Analytics for Social Good, and Seeding Societal Futures. Prospective applicants should review the web pages (see link here) associated with each of these initiatives and explain in their proposals how their research will advance the missions of these initiatives.

Proposals are limited to 1500 words describing the main thrust of the project, with an additional page describing and justifying the proposed budget. While citations do not count towards the word count, teams should remember they will be evaluated by their CMU peers familiar with the team's expertise. We encourage focusing the proposal on the core deliverables and impact, not academic references. The research description should:

- Identify the specific problem the research seeks to address and provide a brief overview of any previous efforts to understand and/or solve the problem. Though a comprehensive review of the past literature is not required, applicants are encouraged to submit a bibliography of prior/relevant research as a supplemental document to highlight their planned contribution.
- Clearly describe the main elements of the proposed research project (including data sources, analytical methodologies, and expected scientific contributions of the project), and explain how the research will provide or advance potential policy solutions to the identified problem.
- Describe the team’s plans to obtain additional funding with as much specificity as possible.
- Identify the primary investigators on the proposal and briefly outline the research team’s qualifications for pursuing the proposed research.

**Timeline for Research Seed Fund**

**August 27** – Proposals due
**September 17** – Winners announced

For both the policy and research seed fund, applicants may submit the full CVs of the PIs as supplemental documents. We will give some priority to teams that are interdisciplinary and include or are led by junior faculty. Please note that Block Center funds should not be used to cover faculty salary, including summer salary. Permissible use of Block Center funds includes funding for undergraduate and graduate student research assistants, purchase of data directly related to the proposal, and expenses associated with conducting the research.
Completed proposals should be saved in PDF format and emailed to call-for-block-proposals@andrew.cmu.edu by August 15, 2021. Applications will be reviewed by Block Leadership: Ramayya Krishnan (Chair), Scott Andes (Executive Director), Lee Branstetter, Amelia Haviland, Tom Mitchell and Rahul Telang. Along with academic peers and policy practitioners. The 2020 proposals were reviewed by a 27 CMU faculty.

If you have any questions relating to your proposal, research concept, or the process please don't hesitate to reach out to Block Center Staff, including Scott Andes, (sandes@andrew.cmu.edu), Mara Leff (Mleff@andrew.cmu.edu) or Grace Klein (gbklein@andrew.cmu.edu) prior to the deadline.