

# Ken Kennedy Institute Research Cluster Initiative (2026-2027)

*Cluster Applications Due May 8, 2026*

## Overview

This [Research Cluster Initiative](#) is sponsored by Rice University to solidify faculty collaborations and nurture breakthrough ideas that will lead to bigger initiatives and funding in the rapidly evolving field of AI and Computing. Specifically, the initiative strives to further strengthen the multidisciplinary research identity of the Institute, develop research capabilities centered around AI and Computing that elevate Rice to the global scene, promote faculty to leadership positions within the Institute and, importantly, *focus the limited financial resources of the Institute to key areas where we can attract significant external funding.*

The initiative was rolled out for the first time in 2024, and a second call was issued in 2025. Information about the current clusters funded through the 2025 call is available on [our web page](#).

**We are now soliciting new proposals for our next round of research clusters.** In this year's call, we wish to better align the research clusters with current funder priorities, Rice's strategic plan, and the broad range of our members' strengths. We are therefore asking each cluster proposal to address a topic area following the suggested guidelines below. Each awarded research cluster will establish a core capability at Rice for research in their area, with an aim toward achieving long-term funding for that research. The Institute will assist in that endeavor by promoting the cluster's research expertise and activities to potential collaborators, funders, donors, etc.

Awarded research clusters will receive initial funding to establish collaborative activities: joint meetings, co-advised students, co-mentored postdocs, workshops in their topic area, etc. Clusters can apply for additional funding during the year for pursuing new opportunities that may arise: travel to proposers' days, assistance in media preparation, etc.

## Topic Areas

We aim to foster both foundational and use-inspired research in AI & Computing that spans disciplines. The following are topic areas where we are actively seeking proposals.

However, it is not exhaustive, so we also encourage proposals in topic areas not explicitly listed below.

- Foundational AI & Computing:
  - a. AI Interpretability
  - b. Human-AI Collaboration
  - c. Vision/Language/Multi-modal AI
  - d. Physical AI
  - e. Systems for Computing and AI
  - f. Quantum Computing
  - g. Unconventional Compute
  - h. Human-centered Intelligent Systems
- Use-Inspired Research in AI & Computing for:
  - a. Scientific Discovery (e.g., Materials, Physics, Biology, Chemistry)
  - b. Education
  - c. Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts
- AI & Computing for the Momentous "Premier Research" pillars:
  - a. Innovations in Health
  - b. Thriving Urban Communities
  - c. Sustainable Futures

## Research Cluster Expectations

1. Submit joint proposals, especially of the medium/large scale.
2. Publish joint papers and other scholarly outputs (software, talks).
3. Co-advise students and co-mentor postdocs.
4. Organize workshops or other events that elevate the cluster's (and Rice's) reputation.
5. Conduct other activities for outreach and visibility (partnerships, speaking engagements, awards, etc.).
6. Establish collaborations with other clusters, other Rice researchers, and researchers beyond Rice.
7. Participate in Institute activities aimed at advancing the cluster's research agenda, whether by providing promotional material, making presentations, etc.
8. Disseminate the cluster's activities to the Institute's membership at a luncheon and at the year-end retreat.
9. Each research cluster PI will participate in the Ken Kennedy Institute Research Council to discuss on-going research activities and grant proposals.

# How to Apply

## Important Dates

- Application deadline: **Friday, May 8 at 11:59pm CT**
- Award announcement: **Friday, June 5**

## Submitting an Application

Apply through the [research cluster application](#) once you have compiled the required materials listed below.

1. 1 page with:
  - Submission title
  - List of PI, Co-I(s), and Associate(s) with their primary departments
2. 1 page outlining your research vision. This should include:
  - Your long-term research objectives
  - The impact of successfully achieving those objectives
  - The strengths of your team and how they stand out from the other groups across the world who are pursuing this same line of research
3. 1 page describing your planned path to larger funding, pinpointing essential milestones and actions. This strategy should include at least one concrete call (either posted or expected) for a medium or large-scale research proposal that the cluster will target. Include a requested budget and details on how it will be allocated to achieve your funding goals.
4. A list of potential partners at Rice (e.g., other institutes, centers) or beyond (e.g., national labs, industry). Letters of support can be submitted but are not required.
5. If you or anyone on your team has received prior support from the Ken Kennedy Institute, list accomplishments (at most three) from that support.
6. A single slide summarizing the cluster's vision statement, suitable for dissemination to non-technical audiences.
7. Biosketch and Current & Pending support documents for every PI, Co-I, and Associate. NSF or NIH formats are ideal (but other formats containing similar information will be accepted).
8. Provide details if in the past 2 years has this effort been funded, supported (grant writing services, funding to submit a large grant on the topic, etc), been considered, or been related in any other way with efforts being funded from another Rice entity (department, dean, another institute, other offices at Rice, etc).

## Review Criteria

Applications will be selected based on an evaluation of:

- Their articulation of a compelling research vision
- The feasibility of the external funding plans
- Qualifications of the faculty members on the team (adjusted by the stage of their career)
- When applicable, results from prior Institute support

## Receiving an Award

If a team's application is selected for award, the following conditions must be met before the award is executed:

1. The Rice University PIs are required to initiate a record in Cayuse, list the Ken Kennedy Institute as both a sponsoring organization and an affiliated unit, and follow the guidelines for [University Funded Research Awards](#).
2. A revised vision statement must be submitted to address any points raised by reviewers of the proposal.
3. A final single slide summarizing the cluster's vision statement, suitable for dissemination to non-technical audiences.
4. Finalized budget.
5. The PI and all Co-Is must be members of the Ken Kennedy Institute.

## Frequently Asked Questions

The following are answers to some general questions about the Institute's Research Cluster Initiative. When in doubt, please direct your questions to the Executive Director for Research Initiatives at the Ken Kennedy Institute. The Institute will review exceptional circumstances when these are brought to its attention.

### Who can be a PI?

The PI must be a Rice University **full-time faculty**. PIs must be members of the Ken Kennedy Institute. If a PI is not a member at the time of application, they must become so before any award can be executed. Faculty can be PI on only one cluster application. A faculty member who is a PI on one cluster application **cannot** be a Co-I on another application. They can, however, be an Associate member on other applications.

### **Can a cluster have multiple PIs?**

No, there must be a single PI for each cluster.

### **Who can be a Co-Investigator?**

Co-Investigators must also be Rice University **full-time faculty**. Co-Is must be members of the Ken Kennedy Institute. If a Co-I is not a member at the time of application, they must become so before any award can be executed. Faculty can be a Co-I on only one cluster application. A faculty member who is a Co-I on one cluster application **cannot** be a PI on another application. They can, however, be an Associate member on other applications.

### **Who can be an Associate member?**

Associates must be Rice University faculty members (or in some special cases, staff may be approved as Associates). Associates' effort cannot be directly funded by cluster funds, so the PI and Co-Is should be a sufficient team for achieving the proposed outcomes. Associates are welcome to contribute, but the success of the endeavor should not overly rely on their efforts. At the same time, Associates are committing to active participation in the research and proposal activities of the cluster, as they deem these important and beneficial to their own success and Rice's research preeminence in AI and Computing. Although the Ken Kennedy Institute does not want to restrict how many clusters a faculty member can be an Associate in, it is recommended that each faculty member carefully consider their time commitment to avoid weakening proposals by committing to too many. The clusters are primarily a mechanism for the submission of medium to large research proposals and when faculty members commit to a cluster in any capacity, they need to be aware of this.

### **How big should a cluster be?**

Clusters typically team 1 PI, 2-5 Co-Is, and any number of associate members.

### **Can a cluster's members all be from a single department?**

No, there should be at least two departments represented across the PI and Co-Is.

### **The topic areas are too general. What happens if two teams apply for the same topic area?**

If two teams submit worthy proposals within the same topic area, but they address two distinct (and still significant) subareas within the overall topic for each to address

individually, then we are willing to fund both. If there is significant overlap between two proposals, then we will ask them to either merge or distinguish themselves more clearly.

### **The topic areas are too specific. Can I propose a research cluster for a topic not included in the list?**

Yes, the topic list is far from exhaustive, and we welcome proposals for topics not covered.

### **Our cluster has already been funded for two years. Can we apply again this year?**

The original call for cluster proposals stipulated that “The funding is renewable for a second year upon review, and up to four years in truly exceptional cases.” You can apply for renewal if you can justify that exceptionality, but we strongly encourage you at least reformulate your research topic and reconstitute your team.

### **Will the new clusters be renewed next year?**

Research clusters are expected to be on a path to self-sustained funding, so they should not rely on Institute funds to continue. If a cluster makes substantial progress toward that goal in their first year, they can apply for renewal. Further renewal is discouraged without significant revision of the cluster objectives, strategy, and team.

### **What are the budget constraints for a cluster proposal?**

The budgetary levels are TBD, as they depend on how many viable proposals we get and our budget allocation from the Office of Research. In the past, funding levels have ranged from \$30-100K. Priority will generally be given on the strength of the proposal's plan for external funding. In addition, during the year, clusters can request additional funding for specific activities toward an announced funding call.

### **Whom can a cluster fund?**

PIs and Co-Is can benefit directly from the allocated funding, whereas Associates cannot receive direct support from the allocated funding. With departmental approval, we will consider teaching release to submit a large proposal. With prior approval, summer faculty salary can be added when leading the effort to write a large proposal.

Allocated funds can be used for research salaries (Rice graduate students, postdocs, and research staff) to support active collaborations. Graduate students and postdocs should be working with more than one faculty member in the cluster, either by being co-advised or at least co-authoring papers.

### **Can I pay for travel with cluster funds?**

Travel can be supported for the purpose of meeting with potential funders or collaborators, or to organize cluster events. Cluster funds are not intended to support paper presentations.

### **What else can be funded by a cluster?**

Allocated funds can be used for administrative/clerical costs (event organization/on-site management), grant writers, meetings, and other costs that contribute to research and proposal writing. For out-of-the-box ideas that foster research or if you are unsure about what is covered, please contact the Ken Kennedy Institute.

### **What cannot be funded by a cluster?**

The following are not permitted: F&A costs, faculty salary, honoraria, bonuses, reducing teaching responsibilities for Rice faculty (except as indicated above), administrative/clerical support salary, capital equipment >\$2,000, travel costs >10%, and subcontracts.

### **When should funds be spent?**

All awarded funds must be utilized within one year of receipt unless an extension is requested at least 90 days before the end of that year. Extensions are not commonly awarded and need proper justification to be granted.

### **What is considered a “medium” or “large” proposal?**

A **medium** proposal is in the \$2M-\$5M range, and a **large** proposal is above \$5M. For researchers outside engineering and sciences, the corresponding numbers are at ¼ of the above levels if the grants are **not** directed to NSF, DOD, DARPA, or NIH.

### **Can I get feedback on my cluster application before the submission deadline?**

Yes, we are happy to provide feedback at any point in your preparation process. In fact, you are encouraged to inform us of your plans as early as possible, as this may prevent rejection of your application for avoidable reasons (e.g., overlapping with another application, ineligible team members).