

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

Explorer Challenge

2025-2026



Overview

For over a decade, the Explorer Challenge, originally known as the Strategic Innovation Fund, has supported collaborative and innovative ideas brought forward by the entire Marquette campus: staff, students and faculty. The unique nature of this competition was recognized by the University Economic Development Association with its Award of Excellence in Innovation in 2018. Information about past awards can be found [here](#). Updated information on this year's competition will be posted [here](#).

In 2024, The University Innovation Council (a cross-campus group of staff, students and faculty) developed an updated version of the Explorer Challenge. This year's competition will continue to use the updated format. Applicants will be required to submit a simple one-page proposal summary which will be supplemented by a short pitch presentation that the Innovation Council will use to determine award recommendations. Details on the application process and support that is available to our campus innovation community to help develop Explorer Challenge ideas can be found in the timeline section below.

We will offer an "innovation sandpit" event in February 2026, where preliminary ideas can be discussed and where the Innovation Council and other members of the campus community will offer assistance in developing these ideas and building teams. If you are interested in submitting a project idea description for discussion at the sandpit, please [complete this submission form](#) by **Friday, January 30, 2026**. We encourage anyone who may be interested in applying to this year's competition to submit the very brief (1-3 sentence) description and participate in the sandpit. Additional workshops and office hours will be held to assist with project development.

We will be offering two different levels of funding as noted below. This will accommodate teams who have ideas that are ready for larger scale funding (up to \$25,000 for a 2-3 year project) as well as those with earlier-stage ideas that would benefit from a planning or pilot year (up to \$5,000).

Funded projects will begin in July or Fall 2026.



**GUIDELINES, FUNDING & TIMELINE
CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE**

< Scan QR code to learn more on our webpage.



Project Guidelines

For the 2025-26 competition, applicants should submit projects that fit in at least one of these categories:

- The creation of innovative new cross-disciplinary collaborations (including building new research teams). Note that research proposals should involve creation of new scholarly endeavors that involve development of new cross-disciplinary teams and not be simple extensions of current research programs.
- The creation of innovative pilot programs that support goals of Marquette's strategic plan themes of *Thriving Students*, *Healthy Campus*, and *Care for the World*. See www.marquette.edu/2031/ for more information on the Strategic Plan themes.

Note that successful Explorer Challenge projects require demonstration of innovation (not just a way to sustain existing programs) and are able to articulate the potential impact of the project.

Funding

The Explorer Challenge is supported by the generosity of donors to Marquette. **For the 2025-2026 competition, we anticipate two levels of funding.**

- **For projects ready to be fully implemented, funds of up to \$25,000 will be available to be spent over a 2-3 year period.** As in the past, a sustainability plan will be needed for projects that plan to extend beyond the Explorer Challenge funding. One or two awards at this level will be anticipated.
- **For projects that need more planning or early-stage pilot activities, we will also have smaller (up to \$5,000) awards available.** Recipients of these one-year awards will be expected to meet with Innovation Council members during their award period for feedback and advice and will be eligible to apply for a larger award in subsequent years. Up to five smaller awards are anticipated.

Timeline

Thursday, December 4, 2025

- Ideas [submission form](#) opens

Friday, January 30, 2026, 11:59 PM

- Preliminary ideas online submission portal closes

Tuesday, February 3, 2026

- Portal ideas made available to campus
- Office hours announced for Innovation Council to assist with project development

Week of February 9-13, 2026

(Exact Date/Time TBD depending on participant schedules)

- ***Explorer Challenge Innovation Sandpit Event***
 - Opportunity for campus community to share project ideas, and build teams
 - Event will be facilitated by members of the University Innovation Council

Week of March 16-20, 2026

(Exact Date/Time TBD depending on participant schedules; We will plan 2 workshop dates to accommodate classes)

- ***Explorer Challenge Proposal Workshops to prepare for:***
 - (a) pitch and accompanying one-page summary; and
 - (b) budget development

Wednesday, March 25, 2026, 5 PM

- Final proposal one-pager, budget template, and pitch slide-decks (1-2 slides) due

Week of April 7-10, 2026

(Exact Date/Time TBD depending on participant schedules)

- ***Explorer Challenge pitches heard***



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