

Grand Challenges
Request for Proposals 2026
Level 2: Grand Challenges Teams

Grand Challenges are problems of global, national, and regional significance that require researchers to work together across disciplinary boundaries to develop and implement solutions. Grand Challenges address problems that, when solved, have a significant positive impact on people and society. These challenges are large in scale, ambitious in scope, and multidisciplinary in nature. They have carefully developed goals that enable multiple paths towards solutions, and that are relevant across varied disciplines and communities.

UNM's Grand Challenges program engages faculty, researchers, staff, and students across the University; grows and fosters a culture of collaboration and team research; increases team success by providing structured support and training; and continues to build UNM's capacity and reputation for discovery and innovation. Since the launch of the UNM Grand Challenges program in 2019 by President Garnett S. Stokes, Grand Challenges teams have surpassed the program's goals, fostering greater interdisciplinary collaborations that engage researchers and students across UNM's campuses and the wider community. The program has also enabled a large increase in extramural funding – Grand Challenges teams have been associated with over \$102 million in external research funding awarded to UNM since 2019.

The Grand Challenges program consists of three levels: **Level 1** introduces new Grand Challenge teams to structured team building, visioning, and planning exercises; **Level 2 implements the teams' plans with a focus on answering critical research questions, building capacity for interdisciplinary research, and engaging the community in the research process and outcomes**; and **Level 3** moves teams towards large, sustainable research structures such as Centers or Institutes within the University. The process is flexible, allowing for multiple entry and exit points for teams and individuals.

This Request for Proposals addresses Level 2 of the program. Participation as a Level 1 team is not a prerequisite for application to the Level 2 program.

Description:

A cohort of **approximately 2 to 5** teams with diverse disciplinary expertise will be competitively selected for the **two-year Level 2** program. Each team will receive **up to \$200,000** to promote program development and will receive facilitation, mentoring, and other program support and training provided by the Office of the Vice President for Research and other UNM units. Teams may also be eligible for additional strategic investments during the Level 2 program, depending on team progress and the availability of funds.

During **Level 2**, teams are expected to (1) use the principles of Team Science to develop effective engagement and communication strategies including engaging community partners and a diverse set of UNM researchers and students; (2) implement the initial stages of their team research roadmaps potentially including, but not limited to, conducting pilot research programs, conceptualizing and developing proposals for external funding, and conducting research programs, preferably with the inclusion of student researchers; (3) participate in Grand Challenge program research, evaluation, and reporting; and (4) communicate the results of their research and their participation in the Grand Challenges program through Grand Challenges, OVPR, and other team-based or University-level communications channels.

At the end of the two-year program, teams will be able to request additional time and support for Level 2 projects (similar to a no-cost extension), may be able to apply to "level up" to Level 3 of the Grand Challenge

program for an additional year of support aimed at the development of centers, institutes, and larger research structures, and/or will enter emeritus status within the Grand Challenge program.

Team Requirements:

- Conveners: Each proposal must designate 2 to 4 conveners, who may be any UNM faculty or staff member eligible to serve as a PI according to UNM policies. The conveners serve as the main points of contact for the program and provide communications and logistical support for the team. An individual may be a convener for only one Level 2 proposal.
- UNM Team Members: All UNM faculty, researchers, post-docs, staff, and administrators are eligible to participate as members of Grand Challenge Level 2 teams. Participation of students is encouraged during Level 2 activities, but students are not expected to be part of the named team membership within the proposal. If a student has been instrumental in the development of the team and/or proposal ideas they should be included as a team member. Individuals may participate as members of multiple teams.
- External Team Members: Community professionals may also be named as team members if they have been actively engaged in developing the research proposal and will be regularly engaged with the team’s work during the program. Partnerships with a full set of stakeholders including other academic institutions, non-profits, and community organizations, are expected, and strongly encouraged, to support the team goals. Evidence of external partnerships will be used to demonstrate broader community support for the team and their research goals, as well as the team’s potential for impact.
- Advisors and Stakeholders: These are additional people and organizations that are interested in and who advocate for the Grand Challenges team but do not participate in the day-to-day operations of the team. Teams are encouraged to develop a broad set of stakeholders and may (but are not required to) list those in advocate or affiliate roles in the Level 2 proposal.

Team Composition: The team composition and size should reflect the scope of the proposed research plan. At the time of application, teams must have at least four team members from at least two academic disciplines. Teams may continue to grow and diversify or might even shrink as teams refine their focus as part of the Level 2 program. Teaming across UNM campuses is encouraged as well as intentional inclusion of team members from disciplines and perspectives that broaden the research program (e.g., Humanities, Arts, Business, and branch campuses). The team should demonstrate diversity across multiple dimensions including, but not limited to, discipline, faculty rank, and social identity.

Expectations:

Teams are expected to enter Level 2 with:

- A shared mission, vision and evidence of a cohesive and functional team as demonstrated by a team charter or comparable mechanisms that clearly articulate shared agreements, practices, and operations
- Shared aspirational goals and key research questions
- A three-to-five-year plan that works toward the aspirational goals
- A funding plan that clearly identifies anticipated external funding sources
- A budget and budget justification for the use of internal funds

- A functioning plan for team logistics including regular meetings, communications, and shared workspaces (as needed to complete the proposed activities).

During **Level 2**, teams are expected to:

- Conduct proposal development and fundraising, perform research, and participate in outreach activities
- Conduct other activities as described in the team’s proposal
- Hire a program/project coordinator to help with meetings, budget management, and other logistics
- Gather as a full team at least once a month, with individual or subgroup activities expected between meetings
- Participate in a kickoff retreat and quarterly cohort meetings with the Grand Challenges Program Manager
- Participate in periodic reviews by the OVPR and Grand Challenges Steering Committee and actively contribute to and participate in an annual Grand Challenges Day where teams publicly present their team’s goals and accomplishments.

Level 2 team members are expected to:

- **Participate constructively in regular cohort and team meetings and trainings**
- Conduct research, proposal development/fundraising, outreach and community engagement, and related activities in support of the team’s vision and plans
- Be a constructive member of the team and the Level 2 cohort, supporting data collection and reporting requests, as well as participating in presentations or other media about team goals and accomplishments.

Additionally, team conveners are expected to:

- **Meet regularly with the Grand Challenges Program Manager and quarterly with other Level 2 teams**
- Prepare brief quarterly reports for the Steering Committee, providing data and progress reports as requested with the knowledge that continued funding will rely upon satisfactory progress as determined by the Steering Committee
- Prepare annual reports for each year of the Level 2 program
- Manage the team’s Level 2 budget and provide quarterly budget updates to the Grand Challenges Program Manager, Steering Committee, and OVPR fiscal officer as requested.

Letter of Intent

Teams are asked to submit a brief letter of intent to apply to the Level 2 Grand Challenges program on or before **5 pm MT on Friday, February 27, 2026**. Please include team name, name of person submitting the letter and their contact information, and a very brief (1-2 sentence) description of the topic area. Submit letter to the Grand Challenges Program Manager at grandchallenges@unm.edu.

Application Process

The following application materials must be submitted through [UNM’s InfoReady System](#) on or before **Friday, May 1st at 5pm MT**. The narrative should be a maximum of 10 pages, not including attachments. Section lengths are provided as a guideline.

- 1. Title** – Title or keywords describing the team’s selected challenge

2. The challenge (2 pages). Provide an overview of the challenge. In your description, address the points of the review criteria (see pages 6-7 of this RFP) including high-level or aspirational goals and impact of your proposed work on the state of New Mexico and New Mexicans.

3. The plan (3-7 pages). As detailed below, this section contains the research questions, goals, and plans for the team's research and related activities. The contents of this section are intended to provide the reviewers with a picture of how the team will go about their research to address the identified challenge. The plan should give reviewers confidence that the team has a clear direction and access to the expertise, facilities, and resources necessary to pursue their research. Related activities that support the goals of the Grand Challenges program should be included in the short-term plans (e.g., pilot programs needed to increase likelihood of external funding, student research, proposal development workshops, innovation challenges, curriculum development, communications, outreach programs, etc.).

3a. Research questions and team goals. Identify the core research questions and shorter-term goals (1-5 years) that the team will address.

3b. Research roadmap. Identify the research and related activities to be undertaken in the shorter term that will address the identified research questions and goals. Include a timeline with well-described quarterly (3-month) milestones for the two years of the Level 2 program. Include the metrics by which your team will measure your successful progress towards meeting your goals.

3c. Funding plan. Include the potential external funding mechanisms to support your team's research and related activities. Indicate funding agencies, deadlines, PI/co-PIs, and match of research question or team goal. Address the likelihood of success and resources needed to help secure this funding in both the short term and for sustainability in the longer term. Note that this can include traditional federal funding agencies (e.g., NSF, NIH), state or local government funding (e.g., RPSP), private foundations (e.g., Keck, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Ford, disease-related foundations), business and industry partners (e.g., Intel, Proctor & Gamble) and/or philanthropic fundraising (e.g., private donor).

4. Team self-assessment (1 page). How does your team hope to benefit from participating in the Grand Challenges? If selected to participate, how can the Grand Challenges program best help your team succeed?

5. Team structure and membership (attachments, not part of the 10-page narrative). Please submit, as an attachment, a team charter (or other comparable mechanism) that contains the sections described below. Also as an attachment, please provide a list of conveners, team members, and community partners on the provided template. Additional affiliates and advocates can be listed if desired but are not required.

5a. Team charter. Please submit a team charter (or comparable mechanism) that includes, at a minimum, the sections described below. You may submit the team charter developed during Level 1 of the program provided it contains the following sections.

If your team did not participate in Level 1, please contact Grand Challenges at grandchallenges@unm.edu for a team charter template and resources for developing each of the required sections noted below. Grand Challenges and/or FRDO can support teams in developing team charters. **The charter should include:**

i. **Team vision and mission.** A vision should describe what the team aspires to accomplish, while a mission describes how the team is working to achieve that vision in the present.

ii. **Goals and deliverables.** Outline the team’s goals for the two-year program and what deliverables the team intends to produce (e.g., publications, public events, community-engaged research work).

iii. **Team structure.** Describe how your team is structured in terms of leadership, membership, and partners. Outline any specific roles your team has designed (e.g., leaders of specific research projects, a program coordinator, sub-groups within the team) Describe how your team is approaching community engagement and intentional inclusivity and diversity across multiple dimensions.

iv. **Communication plans/community agreements.** Describe how your team will communicate, including meeting schedules, tools or resources that will be used for project management, file storage, and collaborative work. The team may also want to include a community agreement, which is a written set of norms that guide how individuals will interact respectfully. The aim of the community agreement is to create guiding principles that ensure all team members are treating each other fairly and with integrity.

v. **Conflict resolution process.** Everyone hopes their team will be conflict-free, but that does not reflect the reality of working collaboratively. People will get sick, overwhelmed with other work, and may drop the ball on their part of the team’s work. What happens if someone doesn’t do their part? How will you resolve disagreements?

5b. List of conveners and team members (not part of the 10-page narrative). In submitting the proposal, the conveners and their contact information will be entered directly into InfoReady. Additionally, use the provided template to attach a list of your team members that includes your team’s name, conveners, team members, and community partners. *This attachment is not counted as part of the narrative.*

Conveners – Identify the name, rank/title, department, campus, and email of the 2-4 leads who will serve as the team conveners. If more than 4 conveners are desired, consider an alternative structure with a smaller number of conveners and an identified leadership team.

Team members – A team member is someone who is involved in the planning and conduct of the research and has agreed to participate regularly in team meetings/activities. It is expected that the team will comprise at least four faculty, staff, and/or administrators from at least two disciplines or areas of expertise. Cross-campus collaborations are encouraged. External (non-UNM) individuals or organizations that will actively participate as defined above should also be listed along with their role on the team.

Optional – List advisors and stakeholders who support the goals of the team and/or who may have participated in the team planning process but who are not involved in day-to-day operations. An advisor is someone who provides input, advice, and/or recommendations from time to time but is not a regular participant in team activities. A stakeholder may be a person, group, or organization that has direct interest in the team's work and/or research outcomes. The team may already be in contact or may be planning to contact these individuals/groups during the course of the program.

Example of information requested for team members:

Name	Convener or member	Rank/Title	Campus	Department or organization	email	role on team

Additional Attachments. These are not included in the narrative page count.

- 1. Budget and budget justification.** Level 2 is budgeted for a maximum of \$200,000 per team over the 2-year program. Indicate the major items for which your team will utilize its budget with a justification narrative explaining what each budget line supports.

Your team should budget for a program coordinator; options include paying for a portion of an existing administrative staff member’s time or hiring a student/graduate assistant on a part-time basis. Other appropriate budget items include expenses for effort coordination, student hires, participant incentives, stakeholder outreach, and pilot data collection and analysis, including the issue of pilot project funding. Large portions of the budget should **not** go to faculty time or course buyouts, though a modest amount of summer salary is allowable. Please break down the budget by fiscal year, assuming a start date of July 1, 2026, and an end date of June 30, 2028. (FY27 = July 1, 2026 – June 30, 2027, FY28 = July 1, 2027 – June 30, 2028)

- 2. Biosketches.** Biosketches should be provided for each of the team conveners and members. Use the Biosketch format appropriate for the funding agencies that are utilized by the conveners. Instructions on how to create an [NSF biosketch can be found here](#).

External members may provide either a resume/CV (two pages max) or brief letter confirming their collaboration.

- 3. References.** If used in the narrative, please provide a list of references.

Deadline: The Level 2 Grand Challenge application is due through UNM’s InfoReady system on **Friday, May 1, 2026, at 5:00pm MDT**. Decisions will be made as soon as possible and are expected by **mid-July 2026**.

REVIEW PROCESS

Each Level 2 proposal will be evaluated by a team of internal and external reviewers, who will make recommendations to the Grand Challenges Steering Committee. The Steering Committee will meet to consider the review team’s recommendations and will prepare a recommendation to the President. The final decision will be made by the UNM President.

Review Criteria

- 1. Grand Challenge Concept Relevance and Research Potential**
 - Research in the proposed challenge area has strong potential to create local, national, or global impact.
 - The identified challenge is of significance to the State of New Mexico and its citizens.

- The topic is a research and innovation area of high priority to the University, the State of New Mexico and/or Federal funding agencies, with strong potential for extramural funding to enhance the capacity and reputation of UNM as a research leader.
- The challenge is of sufficient size and scope to benefit from interdisciplinary research approaches.
- The team’s proposed research approach is appropriate for the problem.
- Now is the right time to pursue this challenge.

2. Interdisciplinary nature of the Grand Challenge and team qualifications

- The nature of the challenge to be pursued requires an interdisciplinary, team approach.
- An appropriate team has been assembled with highly qualified conveners and team members holding expertise in relevant areas.
- The team demonstrates sufficient background and experience within the selected research areas and includes members with a track record of securing research funding.
- The team’s membership intentionally broadens participation and includes representatives from multiple academic disciplines and multiple segments of the University.
- The team has partnerships with external stakeholders including other academic institutions, non-profits, and community organizations.
- Team has a shared vision, mission, and goals
- Team has an established method of communicating effectively
- Team is guided by principles and best practices of team science

3. Clear and Implementable Plans

- The team’s goals and research plan are clear and realistic. The teams define the activities to be conducted during the two years of the **Level 2** program, including outcomes or metrics.
- The team has identified how they will utilize the Grand Challenges funding to further their goals and accelerate their research; budget and budget justification are reasonable and allowable.
- There is strong evidence that the team will supplement internal funding with external sources.
- The funding plan includes detailed funding targets, plans for proposal development workshops, pilot research programs, and other related information.
- The team and their research are expected to benefit from participation in the **Level 2** program. The program is likely to move the team and their research forward beyond what would be otherwise be possible.

Key Dates

Release of RFP: Monday, February 2, 2026
 Program Information Session: February 12 and 18, 2026
 Letter of Intent: Friday, February 27, 2026
 Application Deadline: **Friday, May 1, 2026, at 5:00pm MDT**
 Decisions expected by: mid-July 2026

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND INFORMATION

Two open forum information sessions will be held.

- In-person: February 12, 12:30 – 1:30 pm in [PAIS 1010](#)
Zoom: [Wednesday, February 18, 12-1pm](#)
Additional information sessions will be scheduled upon request.

Submit questions to: grandchallenges@unm.edu. Please visit grandchallenges.unm.edu for additional information.

Application checklist:

1. A narrative that includes title, challenge description, a detailed research plan and a team self-assessment (maximum 10 pages in a font no smaller than 11-pt)
2. A team charter (or comparable mechanism) that includes a vision, mission, goals and deliverables, team structure, communication plans and norms, and a conflict management plan
3. A list of all team conveners, members, and external partners on the provided template
4. A two-year budget by fiscal year and detailed budget justification
5. Biosketches for all team conveners and members (letter of commitment or 2 pp. resume/CV if external)
6. References, if used in narrative