

Request for Proposals: NC State Chancellor's Innovation Fund 2026

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Program Summary

The [**Chef Chancellor's Innovation Fund \(CIF\)**](#) is an intensive accelerator program designed to bridge the critical gap between academic research and commercial readiness.

The program's primary goal is to support researchers working on compelling innovations to complete key technical and business milestones that will de-risk the technology for direct licensing or new startup formation and follow-on funding.

CIF provides commercial mentorship and a structured pathway to secure a commercial lead as part of the application process, culminating in a pitch to external investors for dedicated commercialization funding. The program represents a partnership between NC State's Office of Research Commercialization (ORC) and 2ndF, a local family office supporting deep technology commercialization within the Triangle.

Program Eligibility

Applicant teams must meet all core eligibility requirements. Preference will be given to teams demonstrating existing entrepreneurial engagement.

- *Intellectual Property*: the technology associated with the proposed project must have intellectual property 1) disclosed to the NC State Office of Research Commercialization, and 2) and the innovation that is the focus of the project must be owned by NC State and unencumbered by any existing license or option agreements.
 - Please [submit an invention disclosure to the ORC](#) for the technology related to the proposal if you have not already done so. It is recommended that you complete this as far in advance of the proposal submission deadline as possible to streamline review of the disclosure.
- *NC State Researchers*: CIF funding is open to any NC State faculty, PhD students, or postdocs pursuing commercialization of NC State-owned intellectual property.
 - Note that applicants must have an NC State [Principal Investigator \(PI\)-eligible](#) researcher associated with the project who can accept and manage the award funds on behalf of the team.
- *Customer Discovery*: prior customer discovery work is not required to apply for the 2026 CIF cycle* but any customer discovery interviews done by applicants through a structured program such as I-Corps is preferred.

*Note: Following the 2026 CIF cycle, future applicants for the 2027 cycle and onwards must have successfully completed a [regional I-Corps course](#) or other equivalent structured customer discovery program focused on the same value proposition and customer segment as the CIF proposal, in order to be eligible to apply for CIF funding

- *Commercial Intent*: applicant teams must be able to articulate a preliminary problem/need hypothesis for their technology and a plausible commercialization pathway (startup or licensing).
- *Time Capacity & Commitment*: Participation in CIF Labs (see below) as part of the application process requires at least one committed lead (PI, PhD student, or

postdoc) or more from the applicant team who can dedicate at least one structured engagement per week during the 10-session CIF Labs.

CIF Program Important Dates:

- RFP Released: February 6th, 2026
- Application Deadline: 12 PM (noon), March 2nd, 2026
- Roundtable Pitch Event: April 2nd, 2026
- CIF Labs: May 14th to September 10th, 2026 (10 total sessions)
- CIF Finalist Pitch Day: September 2026
- Award Period Begins: November 1st, 2026
- Award Period Ends: October 31st, 2027

CIF Applications

Proposals should be generated using the [CIF Proposal template](#) and **should be no more than two pages in length** (not including the title page and summary budget), and must utilize a font of 10 points or larger.

The two-page proposal should outline:

1. The market problem being addressed
2. A non-technical description of the team's solution
3. The core project team members and their capacity to move the project forward
4. Previous customer discovery work and insights from those interviews
5. Commercial intent and development pathway based on current knowledge, and identification of next steps

Budget:

CIF proposals must include a high-level summary budget for use of the \$96,500 award funds (this does not count towards the two-page proposal limit). Please note that indirect/F&A costs are not allowed since the funds are awarded under a ledger 7 account.

Review the [award funding section](#) to learn more about eligible activities and expense items.

Application Submission:

Proposals should be sent electronically to CIFprogram1@ncsu.edu prior to the March 2nd proposal submission deadline at 12 PM noon.

Note: applicants will not be required to submit a PINS record at the application submission stage. Any team moving forward into the CIF Labs portion of the process will be required to submit a new PINS record to their department for approval.

Evaluation and Selection Process

Proposal Review & Internal Pitch Round

Innovators with proposals that meet the eligibility criteria will be invited to participate in an internal roundtable pitch event that will enable concurrent evaluations by three distinct groups:

1. Investor/Commercial Lens: ORC and 2ndF staff
2. Executive Leader Lens: A group of experienced, deep tech startup CEOs recruited by 2ndF
3. Research/Commercialization Lens: a group of experienced, successful technical academic startup founders recruited by 2ndF

Final selections for applicant teams to move forward into CIF Labs will be made thematically based on alignment across the three evaluator groups.

CIF Labs

Select semi-finalists will work with ORC and 2ndF over 10 sessions during the summer semester (mid-May to mid-September) to:

1. Identify and clearly articulate problem they are tackling and validate customer demand through extensive customer/market discovery
2. Recruit a CEO / commercial lead to complement the researcher

Weekly Requirement: Each team must dedicate at least one structured engagement per week (workshop, mentor session, or customer interviews) and provide updates to the ORC and 2ndF team.

Accountability: ORC and 2ndF reserve the right to remove teams from Labs if they fail to meet weekly engagement expectations or show insufficient commercialization intent.

CIF Pitch Day

Finalists exiting the CIF Labs will present their validated commercial plans to a panel of external investors in September. Awardees will be selected by the investor panel based on a standardized scoring rubric applied across the following criteria:

- Market Opportunity
- Innovation (Technology/IP strength)
- Commercialization Pathway
- Team & Leadership
- Potential Impact

Award Structure and Expectations

Award Funding

Three to six awards are expected to be funded during the award cycle.

Selected awardees will receive a total of \$96,500 per project, released in milestone-based tranches.

- \$50,000 (NC State: R&D / Technical): To fund research activities (salary, student workers, lab use fees, materials/supplies) that support development of prototypes, validation studies, etc.
- \$46,500 (2ndF: Commercialization): To fund activities that support customer traction, market entry strategy, business model development, and leadership recruitment.

CIF funding is awarded for a twelve-month period, and all funds should be expended during this one year period.

CIF awardees will provide quarterly progress reporting to ORC and 2ndF through scheduled update meetings throughout the award period.

Awardee Goals

1. Advance technology to a licensable or investable stage.
2. Secure commercial leadership and validated customer/partner traction.

3. Define a business model and clear path to capital or licensing.

Upcoming Information Sessions

It is encouraged that prospective applicants attend one of several upcoming info sessions that will outline the program, recent changes, and guidance on how to submit a competitive proposal.

Each meeting will be hybrid, with an in-person option being hosted in Room 205 of the Poulton Innovation Center (1021 Main Campus Drive), and Zoom access also being provided. Recordings will also be made available post-meeting.

Info Session Schedule:

- Friday, February 13th, 11:45 AM - 12:45 PM – [Register](#)
- Tuesday, February 17th, 1:00 PM - 2:00 PM – [Register](#)
- Friday, February 20th, 12:00 PM - 1:00 PM – [Register](#)
- Monday, February 23rd, 12:00 PM - 1:00 PM – [Register](#)

Questions?

For questions related to eligibility, proposal process, criteria, and submission, please contact:

Amy Parker, CIF Program Manager
amy_parker@ncsu.edu
919-515-6673
[Book a 30 minute meeting](#)