RAISING HIGHER:

OneGW's PATH to PREEMINENCE

Working Group on Building an Interdisciplinary Research Ecosystem

Final Report

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Executive Summary

In Fall 2025, President Ellen M. Granberg charged the Interdisciplinary Research Ecosystem Working Group with defining the essential characteristics and components of a thriving interdisciplinary research ecosystem and recommending strategies to promote and expand those characteristics and components across the George Washington University.

Members of this group (listed in Appendix 4) began our work by asking, "What does interdisciplinary mean?" Of course, the answer depends on who is asked. In the field of biomedical engineering, for example, interdisciplinarity is the essence of the field. Other fields, like international relations and comparative education, are similarly rooted in interdisciplinarity, drawing from various social science traditions. Generally, we determined that interdisciplinary research is research in which scholars integrate the methodologies and theories of more than one discipline to produce new knowledge. This understanding is especially important given that generating scholarship with impact is the first goal of the university's strategic framework. Developing a thriving interdisciplinary research ecosystem at GW is therefore essential. While GW has a remarkable legacy of disciplinary excellence, achieving preeminence will require growing our research ecosystem to support and nurture interdisciplinary research that addresses the global challenges of today, such as climate change, public health crises, artificial intelligence, and threats to democracy and humanity around the world.

Interdisciplinary research occurs "when interdisciplinarity is embedded across research, education, and engagement." Therefore, the Working Group has concluded that interdisciplinary research must permeate throughout all aspects of GW: from the labs and classrooms to the finance office to building maintenance and housekeeping to security to the advancement office to the communications and marketing office to the office of general counsel, indeed, it must be part of our culture everywhere. Every area of GW must understand how to support research and what to do to not stifle research. The key findings and recommendations of this report are as follows:

Essential Characteristics and Components of a Research Ecosystem

A strong research ecosystem depends on alignment across structure, culture, and strategy to support faculty-driven, cross-school research. Three overarching principles are central to this approach:

- **Robust Research Infrastructure and Support Capacity:** A thriving ecosystem requires sufficient investment in research development, corporate and foundation relations, and pre- and post-award support to enable interdisciplinary work at scale. These functions should be viewed not as administrative overhead, but as strategic enablers of competitiveness.
- **Structured Lifecycle Management:** The ecosystem should operate under a staged growth model with clear, transparent criteria, defined decision rights, and shared expectations for how institutional resources are allocated and when continued support is warranted. This includes the use of reviewers to guide advancement decisions, as well as defined pathways for scaling, transitioning, or sunsetting initiatives that no longer align with strategic priorities.

» **University Advancement Integration and Diversified Funding Pathways:** A thriving ecosystem actively pursues a broad mix of funding sources, including non-federal funders such as foundations, philanthropy, and corporate partners, alongside federal support to ensure long-term sustainability and resilience, while also cultivating enduring research partnerships with other universities, government agencies, NGOs, firms, and community organizations. This approach should explicitly integrate University Advancement as a core strategic partner in priority-setting, initiative development, and long-term funding strategy.

Drawing on findings from internal case studies and site visits, the Working Group has identified the following characteristics as essential to a robust ecosystem and has prioritized them based on urgency:

» **University-Level Coordination and Stewardship:** A central function or designated leadership is required to steward research across its full lifecycle, providing continuity and visibility without directing faculty agendas. This function is essential to align efforts across schools, support interdisciplinary collaboration, and maintain institutional momentum. While operational responsibilities may be housed within existing structures such as OVPR, effective coordination will require senior-level oversight to guide priorities and investment decisions.

» **Dedicated, Project-Specific Staffing:** Project managers should possess deep institutional knowledge to professionalize early-stage efforts, navigate compliance, and coordinate across schools, including facilitating connections among faculty with complementary expertise from varying backgrounds, with support from specialized pre-award and contracting expertise tailored to the unique requirements of diverse funders.

» **Time and Intellectual Space:** Innovation requires designated shared "intellectual space" and sufficient time for brainstorming and exploration without the immediate pressure of measurable outputs.

» **Tenure and Promotion Coordination:** Tenure and promotion practices should also appropriately recognize interdisciplinary contributions made through faculty members' home schools, departments, and cross-school collaborations.

» **Student and Trainee Engagement:** A thriving interdisciplinary research ecosystem should meaningfully engage PhD students, postdoctoral scholars, and other research-engaged students as integral contributors to research teams, recognizing their role in connecting disciplines, strengthening collaboration, and advancing new ideas.

» **Data-Driven Progress Tracking:** The use of dashboards and metrics – such as cross-school grant submissions, co-authorship networks, and citation performance – is necessary to measure the health and growth of interdisciplinary activity. These measures should be applied flexibly and aligned with the norms of specific disciplines, recognizing that appropriate indicators of impact and success vary across fields.

» **Integrated Systems and Physical/Virtual Spaces:** Success depends on modern, faculty-centered research administrative software to reduce administrative burden. Furthermore, the ecosystem must provide both physical "co-location" spaces and virtual thematic research communities to encourage spontaneous exchange.

Summary of Strategic Recommendations

The Working Group identified significant cultural and operational barriers. The following strategies are recommended to address these challenges:

Near-Term:

1. Broaden and diversify the organizational models through which interdisciplinary research is pursued, including institutes, centers, initiatives, academic units, and degree programs.
2. Introduce a stage-gate model to support interdisciplinary research, which establishes a broad-based Stage 1 seed fund for exploratory collaborations and provides larger, milestone-driven Stage 2 grants with structured review to assess progress, alignment, and readiness for scaling.
3. Ensure both federal and non-federal funding readiness and provide sponsor-specific administrative expertise, and strengthen enduring external research partnerships.
4. Invest in faculty time and incentivize interdisciplinary research through coordinated support to foster innovation that occurs from the bottom up, including shared investment models between central university leadership and participating schools to support faculty hiring lines and PhD student support in areas of interdisciplinary strength.

Medium-Term:

5. Evaluate interdisciplinary initiatives using a consistent framework that compares external funding generated to institutional investment, while accounting for research activity that would have occurred independently. This should be complemented by measures of scholarly impact, capacity building, and contributions to institutional reputation.
6. Remove operational barriers by streamlining and accelerating administrative processes.
7. Ensure long-term sustainability through improved financial and administrative frameworks, such as dedicated recurring internal funds, cost-sharing models across schools, and appropriate allocation of IDCs for non-federal awards.
8. Select a small number of interdisciplinary initiatives for focused institutional support, prioritizing those with critical mass, effective leadership, clear goals, cross-school participation at inception, defined milestones, a proven track record of attracting major funding, and strong potential for competitiveness and long-term sustainability.

Longer-Term:

9. Implement hiring incentives for interdisciplinary appointments or cross-school joint positions. Develop the concept of faculty or postdoctoral cluster hires across disciplines/schools.
10. Explore a broader matching model in which central resources are paired with school-level funding to support interdisciplinary research priorities and encourage shared investment between the university and participating schools.
11. Improve visibility and branding of interdisciplinary initiatives by providing marketing support to develop clear names, narratives, and outward-facing identities to improve website, searchability, external recognition, and competitiveness.

Framework for Advancing High-Potential Interdisciplinary Research at GW

The Working Group developed a framework for advancing interdisciplinary research at GW that integrates how ideas are generated, evaluated, and scaled. To address the limitations of both top-down and purely bottom-up approaches, the report recommends a hybrid model in which faculty-driven ideas are advanced through a structured process, beginning with a university-wide call for proposals, followed by selective seed funding, and culminating in milestone-based investment in the most competitive and scalable initiatives. To guide these decisions, the Working Group identified ten core attributes that define successful interdisciplinary efforts, including strong faculty leadership, meaningful cross-disciplinary integration, the ability to attract diverse external funding, and clear alignment with institutional priorities and societal impact.

Applying this framework, the Working Group identified three high-potential interdisciplinary domains – Trustworthy AI, democracy research, and neuroscience – that reflect significant existing faculty activity and external competitiveness. Based on the Working Groups' survey of existing institutes and centers, interviews with various GW researchers, and preliminary data analysis, these three interdisciplinary research areas are illustrative of where GW is well-positioned to scale impact through a structured and inclusive selection process.

The Trustworthy AI Initiative, Institute for Data, Democracy, and Politics, and Neuroscience research serve as central proof points for how an interdisciplinary research ecosystem can function in practice and demonstrate that the proposed model is already delivering strong return on investment. Together, these examples highlight both the strength of GW's existing interdisciplinary research and the opportunity to more systematically support and scale these efforts. With a coordinated framework, targeted investment, and sustained institutional alignment, GW is well-positioned to expand its leadership in high-impact interdisciplinary research.

Respectfully Submitted,
The Interdisciplinary Research Ecosystem Working Group



Introduction

The Interdisciplinary Research Ecosystem Working Group was convened in October 2025 to advance the George Washington University's strategic framework, particularly the university's ambition to achieve institutional preeminence through research, scholarship, and impact by leveraging GW's distinctive strengths, location, and breadth of disciplines. The strategic framework emphasizes the importance of addressing complex, real-world challenges; fostering collaboration across traditional boundaries; and aligning institutional resources to areas where GW can generate sustained scholarly, societal, and policy impact. Interdisciplinary research is therefore not an end in itself, but a core mechanism for advancing the university's mission, values, and long-term strategic priorities.

Since its launch, the Working Group has met eight times and engaged faculty and staff from across all schools to examine how GW can strengthen and sustain a thriving interdisciplinary research ecosystem. Across these meetings, the group has focused on understanding both the current state of interdisciplinary research at GW and the structural, cultural, and strategic conditions required to enable interdisciplinary work to flourish at scale.

As part of this effort, the Working Group reviewed existing landscape materials. The group began by considering the Innovation Committee's report and its 30 Idea Briefs, and conducted a broad scan of GW's institutes, centers, and other research entities. The group then examined the list of research institutes and centers at GW to better understand their role in the GW landscape of interdisciplinary research. From this list and recommendations of Working Group members, we selected efforts at varying stages of maturity to study further, recognizing that while institutes and centers play an important role, much of GW's interdisciplinary research activity occurs outside formal structures. We considered presentations from eight institutes, centers, and initiatives as case studies, ranging from mature and sustainably funded models such as the GW Cancer Center to emerging interdisciplinary initiatives such as the Institute for Socioeconomic Opportunity. Each case study allowed us to explore governance arrangements, funding pathways, staffing models, and long-term sustainability considerations, with an eye toward identifying patterns that contribute to success.

Data Collection

In sum, the Working Group gathered and reviewed data from three sources. First, during several of our meetings, the Working Group heard presentations by eight leaders from institutes, initiatives, and centers already growing and doing impactful interdisciplinary research at GW. The list of those presentations appears in Appendix 1. Second, leaders of the Working Group traveled to conduct a site visit at Northeastern University. Lessons learned from that investigative trip are summarized in Appendix 2. Finally, the Working Group examined preliminary data from our OVPR, CCAS, and GW Law to analyze some indicators of the interdisciplinary work currently being conducted at GW. The data is still in a preliminary stage and is presented in Appendix 3. This work aligns directly with the strategic framework's call for strategic investments, improved coordination, and clearer pathways for translating ideas into impact.

In parallel, the group examined the cultural and operational barriers that have historically constrained interdisciplinary collaboration at GW. These discussions surfaced recurring challenges related to incentives and recognition; promotion and tenure expectations; hiring and startup practices; recognition and attribution of credit for cross-school grants; cost sharing and indirect cost recovery; and administrative friction across contracting, compliance, and research support functions. The group also discussed the importance of ensuring that humanities, social sciences, and professional fields are fully integrated into interdisciplinary research efforts alongside STEM disciplines, with field-appropriate definitions of impact and success.

Non-Federally Funded Interdisciplinary Research

A major theme that emerged from the Working Group's discussions is that a strong interdisciplinary research ecosystem at GW must include a deliberate strategy for non-federal funding. Federal support remains essential, but it is often organized through agency-specific mandates that can make it difficult for projects spanning medicine, public health, engineering, social sciences, policy, and the humanities to fit neatly within a single program. Non-federal funders—including foundations, philanthropy, corporate partners, and international sponsors—are often better positioned to support interdisciplinary initiatives because they prioritize innovation, real-world impact, and cross-sector collaboration rather than disciplinary boundaries alone.

The importance of non-federal funding is heightened by the current instability of the federal landscape. Priorities related to public health, artificial intelligence, climate change, and research workforce diversity can shift substantially across administrations, creating uncertainty for long-term interdisciplinary initiatives that require continuity of support. A diversified portfolio that includes non-federal support can help GW sustain strategic areas of strength even when federal priorities change, while also allowing interdisciplinary teams to pursue complementary funding streams across fields.

At the same time, non-federal funding requires a different institutional support model. These awards often carry lower indirect cost recovery than federal grants, making efficiency in pre-award development, contracting, and project launch especially important. Extensive back-and-forth, prolonged contract negotiations, and staff unfamiliarity with funder-specific requirements create unnecessary institutional expense and can jeopardize sponsor confidence. For GW to compete successfully, non-federal funding must be treated not as an ancillary activity, but as a core component of the interdisciplinary research ecosystem, supported by specialized pre-award expertise, funder-specific contracting capacity, and rapid-response administrative pathways.

Infrastructure and Capacity Constraints

A consistent theme across the Working Group's discussions was the presence of institutional capacity constraints that limit the university's ability to scale interdisciplinary research. These constraints are particularly evident in research development, corporate and foundation relations, and pre- and post-award support. In many cases, existing support functions are both understaffed and overextended, creating bottlenecks that slow proposal development, delay project execution, and reduce competitiveness for external funding.

Insights from peer institutions further reinforce this challenge. Institutions that have successfully scaled interdisciplinary research have made substantial investments in centralized and embedded research support infrastructure, including dedicated research development teams and integrated pre- and post-award services. These capabilities enable faster response to funding opportunities, stronger proposal development, and more effective coordination across complex, multi-school initiatives.

The Working Group therefore emphasizes that research infrastructure should not be viewed as administrative overhead, but as a strategic enabler of growth, competitiveness, and institutional impact. Without targeted investment in these enabling functions, efforts to expand interdisciplinary research will remain constrained, regardless of faculty interest or institutional ambition.

Fulfilling The Charge

Against this backdrop, the Working Group's charge has been to articulate a clear, institution-wide understanding of what constitutes a thriving interdisciplinary research ecosystem at GW, and to recommend strategies that align with the strategic framework to promote and expand that ecosystem in a sustainable, equitable, and mission-aligned way. Specifically, the Working Group has been tasked to:

- Define the essential characteristics and components of a thriving interdisciplinary research ecosystem.
- Recommend strategies to promote and expand those characteristics and components across GW.
- Identify examples of existing interdisciplinary research projects that reflect essential characteristics and components of work that can help GW achieve institutional preeminence through research productivity that meets the goals of the strategic framework.

A thriving interdisciplinary research ecosystem at GW depends on aligning structure, culture, and strategy to support faculty-driven research that spans disciplines and schools. This ecosystem combines strong structural foundations such as staffing, funding, governance, and infrastructure with institutional enablers that reward collaboration, clarify expectations, and reduce barriers to interdisciplinary work. By advancing bottom-up initiatives through a clear staged growth model, GW can focus resources on competitive and sustainable programs while maintaining flexibility and accountability across the research enterprise.

The group's work has been loosely divided into two components:

1. Identifying the essential characteristics of an ecosystem that is required to support an effective interdisciplinary research community and develop a logical mechanism to identify and promote those activities that can develop into large university-wide interdisciplinary research programs.
2. Identifying the essential characteristics and components of work that can advance the university's strategic framework within a thriving research ecosystem and highlighting examples of projects at GW that warrant institutional support through targeted resources, investment, and other forms of enablement.

The work undertaken has led to the identification of the essential characteristics and components of a robust research ecosystem, as well as a set of recommendations designed to help the university intentionally invest in, support, and scale interdisciplinary research as a core driver of scholarly excellence and impact.

Essential Characteristics and Components of an Interdisciplinary Research Ecosystem

A thriving interdisciplinary research ecosystem requires a set of shared structures, supports, and expectations that make it easier for faculty to collaborate across disciplines, sustain promising ideas over time, and translate research into meaningful impact. The characteristics below reflect what the Working Group consistently heard in its meetings: interdisciplinary research succeeds when the university provides clear coordination, reduces unnecessary friction, invests in people and infrastructure, and aligns resources with strategic priorities, all while preserving faculty autonomy and disciplinary strength.

1. **University-level coordination and stewardship.**

   A thriving ecosystem includes a university-level coordination function—either a central entity or clearly designated leadership responsibility—that supports interdisciplinary research across its full lifecycle. This function operates at an institutional level, complementing rather than replacing the role of institute directors and faculty leadership by providing cross-school coordination, continuity, and visibility across initiatives. It does not direct research agendas but instead enables alignment, reduces fragmentation, and helps teams move from early ideas to more mature collaborations. Core responsibilities include program development, milestone definition, progress tracking, coordination of support and resources, and maintenance of institutional memory so that promising efforts are not repeatedly rebuilt from scratch.

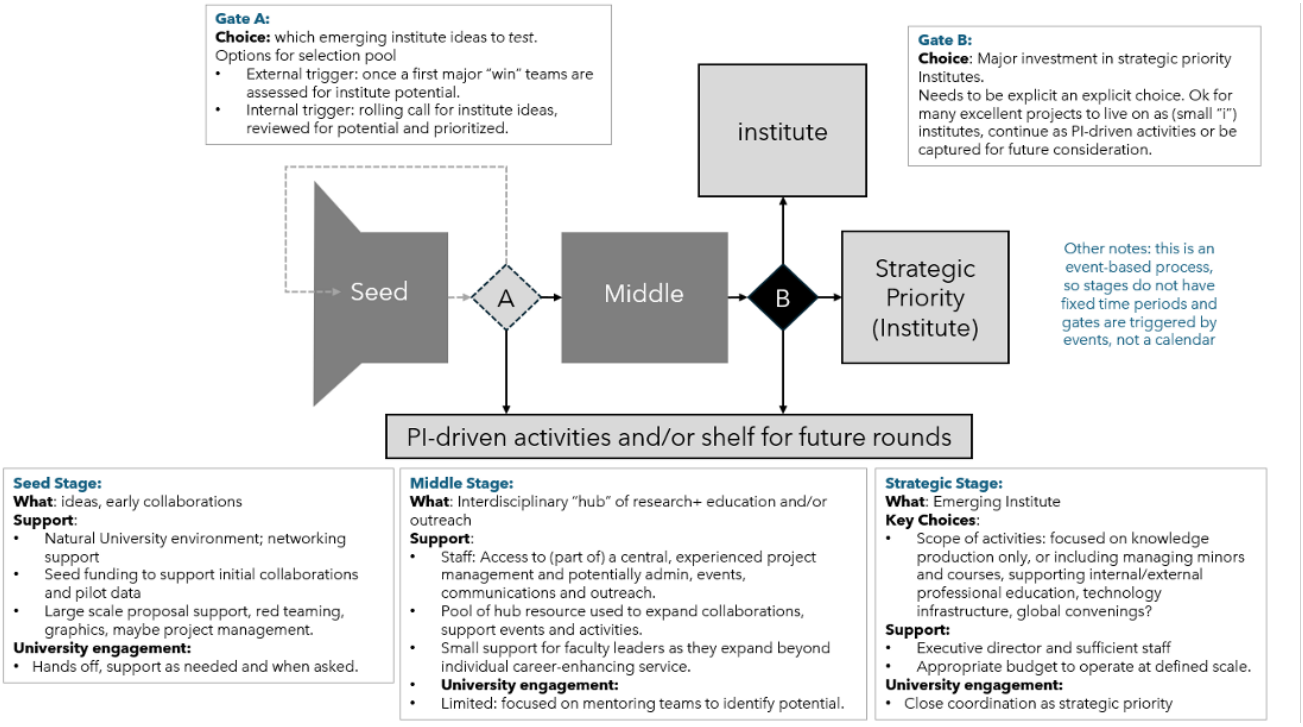
   A central coordinating function should align efforts across schools and units, support interdisciplinary collaboration, and maintain institutional momentum over time. While peer institutions take varied approaches—some housing this function within central research offices and others embedding it within senior leadership structures—the key distinction is between operational execution and strategic decision-making. Operational responsibilities, including research development, faculty coordination, and administrative support, should reside within the Office of the Vice Provost for Research (OVPR), given its existing roles and responsibilities. However, strategic authority—such as setting priority areas, making major investment decisions, and determining which initiatives are advanced or scaled—should sit at the highest levels of university leadership, including the Provost and senior executive leadership.

   In exploring how such a function might operate, the Working Group examined stage-based approaches often used in research and innovation settings. The group agreed that any such framework must be adapted to a university context: flexible rather than linear, supportive rather than prescriptive, and attentive to the reality that most research remains faculty-driven. The goal is not to force projects through a rigid sequence, but to provide shared expectations, decision points, and pathways for initiatives that may evolve into larger, university-level priorities.

Below is a GW-research-ecosystem-specific version of the Stage Gate model (Cooper, 2014) that Professor Zoe Szajnfarber shared with the group as a strawman to work from. Variations of this model are widely used across companies and organizations to structure product development efforts. Szajnfarber had previously studied NASA's innovation ecosystem through this lens.

At its core, the stage-gate model is a process through which a broad set of potential ideas is progressively narrowed to a smaller set of high-potential initiatives that advance toward implementation or deployment. The process leverages a sequence of stages, each designed to support activities required to further develop and mature ideas, and gates, or decision points at which leaders assess progress and determine which initiatives should advance, be refined, or be discontinued.

While the innovation literature is replete with criticism of this over-simplification and it is rarely effective when too rigidly applied, it remains a useful framework for organizing a discussion of what is needed at each stage and what is being decided at each gate.



Key structural components of this coordination function include:

a. **Dedicated, specific staffing with institutional knowledge.** Promising interdisciplinary work requires sustained administrative and project management support that is closely tied to the project itself. Effective project managers bring strong institutional knowledge of GW's research landscape and administrative processes, enabling them to support proposal development, funding roadmaps, compliance navigation, logistics, communication, and coordination in ways that professionalize early-stage efforts and strengthen external positioning. This model is intended to complement—not duplicate—the role of institute directors and faculty leadership by reducing the administrative burden currently placed on those responsible for advancing scholarly work. While some overlap in administrative functions across units may be unavoidable, this model would reduce unnecessary duplication by providing consistent, embedded support across collaborating schools, improving coordination and efficiency without compromising project-specific needs. The funding model for this support structure is still to be determined, but will likely include a combination of institutional investment and cost recovery through sponsored project grants. For interdisciplinary initiatives pursuing non-federal funding, this staffing model should explicitly include sponsor-specific pre-award expertise so that administrative support is assigned based on the type of funder rather than solely by investigator portfolio.

b. **Clear, yet flexible and transparent criteria** for institutional investment decisions, potentially informed by the development of interdisciplinary research hubs aligned with defined university priority areas and guided by agreed-upon milestones.

c. **A structured system of gatekeeping to identify decision-makers** responsible for advancing projects through each stage, including a comprehensive review protocol with assessments by impartial reviewers not affiliated with participating schools.

d. **Clear sunsetting, consolidation, or transition pathways for institutionally supported initiatives at certain stages,** with transparent criteria and processes to guide how university resources are allocated, repositioned, or concluded over time based on alignment with strategic priorities and lifecycle stage. These processes are not prescriptive of faculty research agendas but rather ensure that central investments and infrastructure are intentionally aligned with evolving institutional goals and opportunities.

e. **Dashboards to track progress over time using key metrics** – such as cross-school grant submissions, co-authorship networks, and the formation of research clusters – and to assess growth in interdisciplinarity through indicators including citation performance, topic modeling, and proposal activity. These dashboards should provide both initiative-level and institution-wide visibility, enabling leadership to identify emerging areas of strength, monitor collaboration patterns, and inform strategic investment decisions. At the same time, these measures should be applied flexibly and aligned with the norms of specific disciplines, recognizing that appropriate indicators of impact and success vary across fields. Evaluation frameworks should therefore incorporate field-appropriate metrics, including quantitative, qualitative, and non-traditional outputs where relevant, to ensure a more comprehensive and equitable assessment of interdisciplinary research activity.

2. **Integrated systems, spaces, and support that encourage collaboration.**
    a. **Modern and integrated university research administration systems** to better support interdisciplinary research and reduce faculty burden. Systems such as myResearch and Elements should be connected to function as a cohesive, faculty-centered ecosystem rather than a set of standalone tools, allowing information captured through grant submissions and awards to populate faculty reporting and administrative processes. These systems support funder-specific workflows, rapid routing for foundation and corporate agreements, and shared visibility across pre-award, contracting, and University Advancement.

    b. **Shared physical and virtual collaboration spaces to encourage interdisciplinary engagement.** Interdisciplinary initiatives often flourish when researchers from different disciplines can easily connect, exchange ideas, and work together. In addition to shared workspaces or designated co-location floors, virtual collaboration environments such as thematic research communities, shared digital workspaces, discussion forums, and periodic virtual idea or incubation labs support participation across schools, campuses, and schedules. Complementing these spaces, the university should organize targeted group discussions and convenings around emerging or high-priority interdisciplinary topics, with invitations extended to relevant departments across multiple schools. These structured interactions can help faculty identify shared interests, build relationships, and catalyze new collaborations. At the same time, this approach recognizes that much STEM research will continue to be conducted within specialized lab settings.

    c. **Time and intellectual space.** True innovation requires time for brainstorming, convening, and exploration without immediate deliverables that produce immediate measurable output.

3. **Investment in faculty, students, and staff.**
    a. **Shared technical infrastructure funded via interdisciplinary overhead.** A portion of interdisciplinary indirect cost recovery or other centrally designated funds invested in shared technical assistance (such as grant review, mentoring, research design, and analytic support) that is available to teams pursuing interdisciplinary work. Shared infrastructure includes expertise in non-federal proposal development, partnership cultivation, narrative framing for philanthropic sponsors, and sponsor-specific budgeting and compliance support.

    b. **Strategic investments in interdisciplinary faculty capacity and PhD student support, with a primary focus on enabling existing faculty to reach their full potential.** To attract faculty with interdisciplinary research interests, GW should strategically leverage future faculty hiring lines and consider shared investment models, including matching commitments between the Provost's Office and participating schools. Similar approaches should be considered for doctoral student support and other targeted investments in interdisciplinary capacity. PhD students, postdoctoral scholars, and other research-engaged students are important engines of interdisciplinary research, often working across disciplinary boundaries, connecting faculty and methods, and helping generate new collaborations, research questions, and pathways for innovation. Existing institutional data and analytics are leveraged to identify areas of demonstrated interdisciplinary strength and momentum. This analysis includes: large-scale, interdisciplinary proposal activity over the past five years to surface emerging areas of strength and existing collaborative efforts; co-publishing networks and faculty collaborations; a decomposition analysis; indicators of collaboration reflected in press releases and proposal submissions; a network map of SSRN by research category; and grants and funding data to

identify established collaborative networks and key faculty who connect multiple colleagues and have proven track records. Together, these insights can guide decisions about where cluster hiring, doctoral student investment, or other targeted supports (such as course relief, seed funding, or project management assistance) are most likely to accelerate interdisciplinary research impact.

c. **Coordinated strategic partnerships.** Intentional emphasis on connecting investigators to other collaborators and partners, internal and external. Establish a centralized matchmaking function to proactively connect investigators with complementary expertise across schools and with external partners aligned with strategic priority areas. These partnerships should extend beyond funding relationships to include enduring research collaborations with other universities, government agencies, NGOs, firms, and community organizations that bring complementary expertise, perspectives, data, and opportunities for impact.

Recommended Strategies

The Working Group has developed a set of strategic recommendations to address institutional barriers and promote a thriving interdisciplinary research ecosystem at GW. These recommendations are intended to strengthen the university's ability to support, scale, and sustain interdisciplinary research as a core driver of scholarly impact. To reflect both urgency and implementation feasibility, the recommendations are organized into near-term, medium-term, and longer-term actions. This structure is designed to help clarify the relative immediacy and sequencing of each recommendation. Near-term actions focus on reducing immediate barriers and supporting existing interdisciplinary efforts, medium-term actions emphasize structural and process improvements to enable growth and coordination, and longer-term actions address sustained institutional development and long-term impact.

Near-Term:

1. **Broaden and diversify the organizational models through which interdisciplinary research is pursued, including institutes, academic units, and degree programs.**
    a. GW should **explicitly define a thriving interdisciplinary research ecosystem** as encompassing major research institutes and centers as well as interdisciplinary teaching, academic programs, departments, and schools that contribute to the university's overall research mission.

    b. **Pursue multiple organizational models for interdisciplinary research** and enhance transparency around processes, opportunities, and criteria to foster a shared understanding institution-wide. GW should consider interdisciplinary academic units (e.g., departments, programs, or schools with an interdisciplinary research focus, such as AI or Ecology) as sustainable vehicles for interdisciplinary research, education, and growth.

    c. **Leverage academic programs to improve sustainability and revenue generation.** GW should recognize that interdisciplinary academic units and degree programs can be financially sustainable by generating tuition revenue, potentially making them no more expensive than institute-based models.

    d. **Take measured risks in launching interdisciplinary graduate programs.** GW should pilot interdisciplinary MS programs within existing academic units as a way to stimulate interdisciplinary research activity, attract students, and generate additional revenue while testing demand.

    e. **Encourage curricular innovation across existing programs.** GW should incentivize faculty to integrate interdisciplinary content into existing courses and programs, including through summer grants or curriculum development funding, and cross-departmental co-teaching. Interdisciplinary institutes and centers should likewise be structured to amplify the strengths of participating schools and departments by fostering collaboration, extending capacity, and creating opportunities that individual units could not achieve alone.

2. **Introduce a stage-gate model to support interdisciplinary research** by establishing a standing Stage 1 seed fund for exploratory collaborations, building on the existing Cross-Disciplinary Research Fund, and providing larger, fixed-term, milestone-driven Stage 2 grants with structured

internal and external review to assess progress, strategic alignment, and readiness to scale into hubs or institutes. Within this model, seed funding should be used strategically to support early-stage proof of concept for emerging interdisciplinary initiatives. These initial investments enable teams to test ideas, build momentum, and demonstrate viability—both internally and to external partners. In addition to advancing research development, seed funding can serve as a tool for engaging philanthropic and corporate partners, helping to cultivate relationships and create pathways for larger, long-term investments.

3. **Ensure federal and non-federal funding readiness and provide sponsor-specific administrative expertise.** GW should strengthen its capacity to compete for and manage both federal and non-federal funding by aligning administrative support with sponsor expectations, building targeted expertise, and increasing institutional agility. This includes creating rapid-response pathways for time-sensitive opportunities—such as foundation, philanthropic, corporate, and international awards—so promising interdisciplinary proposals are not delayed or lost due to slow internal processes.

    a. **Match interdisciplinary teams to pre-award administrators** based on targeted funder type rather than assigning one administrator to each individual investigator. This approach builds deeper sponsor knowledge, improves proposal quality, and reduces time lost to repeated interpretation of funder-specific requirements.

    b. **Integrate University Advancement** into the interdisciplinary research lifecycle from the outset, positioning it as a strategic partner in identifying funding opportunities, shaping initiatives, cultivating relationships with philanthropic and corporate partners, and supporting long-term sustainability planning. This approach should be coordinated with research administration to ensure consistent outreach, shared institutional messaging, and proactive engagement with high-value non-federal funders whose priorities align with GW's interdisciplinary strengths.

    c. **Build contracting teams with expertise in major foundations, philanthropies, corporate sponsors, and international non-federal awards.** Sponsor-specific contracting capacity will reduce back-and-forth, accelerate execution, and protect opportunities that may be jeopardized by prolonged negotiations.

    d. **Recognize that many non-federal awards generate lower IDC recovery** and, therefore, require especially efficient processes. In these environments, reducing administrative waste is economically beneficial because it preserves net institutional value and allows more resources to support the research itself.

    e. **Invest in a significantly larger research development staff, with both central and embedded expertise to support research priorities in each college**, as well as interdisciplinary research projects. While visiting Northeastern University, we met with some of the nearly 40 members of that university's central and Embedded Research Development Team and with members of the Northeastern University Research Enterprise Services (NU-RES) team, which works in conjunction with research support embedded in six of Northeastern's ten colleges. We found the size, structure, and effectiveness of these two Northeastern University research support teams to be key contributors to the success of the research infrastructure at Northeastern.

    f. **Adopt a diversified and coordinated funding strategy** that balances federal, foundation, corporate, philanthropic, and non-sponsored research support across the university. This approach requires shared ownership across schools, central administration, and support units

to align messaging, reduce duplication, and distribute workload, ensuring that interdisciplinary research efforts are supported through a balanced, sustainable portfolio of funding sources.

4. **Invest in faculty time and incentivize interdisciplinary research through coordinated support.** GW should elevate and support existing faculty with interdisciplinary interests through a coherent set of mutually reinforcing mechanisms that recognize faculty time constraints, reduce participation barriers, and signal the institutional value of interdisciplinary work, while continuing to fully value and resource faculty pursuing single-discipline research. These supports should include:

   a. **Protected time and workload flexibility.** Allow partial allocation of faculty research and teaching time to interdisciplinary programs and initiatives, enabling sustained engagement without requiring a wholesale shift away from home departments.

   b. **Targeted financial and project support.** Provide selective, time-limited supports—such as seed funding, project management assistance, summer grants, or bridge funding—to help faculty launch, coordinate, and sustain interdisciplinary work during critical development phases.

   c. **Teaching backfill and instructional capacity offsets.** When faculty contribute teaching effort to interdisciplinary programs, provide compensatory mechanisms (e.g., lecturer support or instructional funds) to offset lost capacity in home units, recognizing that this approach is often more cost-effective than hiring additional tenure-track faculty.

   d. **Selective recognition of faculty leadership and service contributions.** Reduce service burdens or provide formal course buyouts for faculty who assume significant leadership, coordination, or administrative roles in interdisciplinary initiatives, applying these mechanisms selectively rather than universally.

   e. **Explicit cultural reinforcement of interdisciplinary engagement.** Encourage faculty to expand beyond disciplinary silos by clearly signaling that interdisciplinary research, leadership, and collaboration are institutionally valued—while affirming that faculty pursuing discipline-based research trajectories continue to be fully supported and recognized.

   f. **Revised tenure and promotion criteria** to appropriately recognize interdisciplinary and collaborative contributions such as team science, co-authorship, shared grants, and collective impact, alongside sustained recognition of independent, discipline-based scholarship.

   g. **Initiate a comprehensive cross-school faculty compensation review** to develop a unified salary framework that aligns with GW's strategic transition toward an interdisciplinary ecosystem.

Medium Term:

5. **Evaluate interdisciplinary initiatives** using a consistent framework that assesses the return on investment (ROI) of an institute or collaboration by weighing external funding enabled by the collaboration against the level of institutional investment, while also accounting for the research activity faculty would likely have generated absent the collaborative structure. Effective collaborations actively connect faculty across schools and departments who might not otherwise engage with one another, enabling the combination of complementary expertise to address complex problems that cannot be tackled within a single discipline. The added value of the collaboration lies in its ability to catalyze new research directions, form novel teams, accelerate proposal development, and create shared intellectual agendas.

6. **Remove operational barriers by streamlining and accelerating administrative processes.** Across multiple meetings, faculty and institute leaders consistently described administrative processes as one of the most significant barriers to interdisciplinary research at GW. These challenges include lengthy and risk-averse contract review processes (particularly for non-federal, philanthropic, and international work), slow hiring and onboarding timelines even when funding is already secured, unclear or inconsistent guidance across offices, and limited escalation pathways when time-sensitive decisions stall. These barriers are particularly acute for non-federal funding, where short timelines, bespoke agreements, and lower IDC recovery magnify the cost of delay.
7. **Ensure long-term sustainability through improved financial and administrative frameworks,** such as dedicated recurring internal funds, cost-sharing models across schools, and appropriate allocation of IDCs. For non-federal awards, these frameworks should explicitly account for lower IDC environments and reward efficient administrative processes that maximize net institutional return rather than raw overhead alone.
8. **Select a small number of interdisciplinary initiatives for focused institutional investment,** prioritizing those with critical mass, effective leadership, clear goals, cross-school participation at inception, defined milestones, a proven track record of attracting major funding, and strong potential for competitiveness and long-term sustainability. These investments should be aligned with a milestone-driven model to ensure accountability, track progress, and guide decisions around scaling, continued support, or transition.

Longer-Term:

9. **Implement hiring incentives** for interdisciplinary appointments or cross-school joint positions. Develop the concept of cluster hires across disciplines/schools.
10. **Explore a broader matching model** in which central resources are paired with school-level funding to support interdisciplinary research priorities and encourage shared investment between the university and participating schools.
11. **Improve visibility and branding of interdisciplinary initiatives** by providing marketing support to develop clear names, narratives, and outward-facing identities to improve website, searchability, external recognition, and competitiveness for funding and partnerships.

Framework for Advancing High-Potential Interdisciplinary Research at GW

A thriving interdisciplinary research ecosystem requires a clear and intentional approach to how ideas are generated, evaluated, and scaled. Based on its review of internal case studies, site visits, and working group discussions, the Working Group identified both the processes that enable successful interdisciplinary development and the characteristics that define initiatives best positioned for institutional investment. Together, these elements provide a framework for identifying, supporting, and scaling high-impact interdisciplinary research at GW.

Generation, Evaluation, and Advancement of Interdisciplinary Initiatives

A central challenge in building an interdisciplinary research ecosystem is determining how to identify and invest in priority areas without over-centralizing decision-making or overlooking emerging, faculty-driven opportunities. Traditional top-down approaches, which pre-select disciplines or thematic areas, risk missing innovative collaborations that emerge organically across the university. At the same time, purely bottom-up models—while more inclusive and generative—often lack the institutional support, coordination, and clear pathways needed to translate promising ideas into sustained, scalable initiatives. Without structured mechanisms for evaluation, investment, and advancement, many faculty-driven efforts struggle to secure the visibility, resources, and university-wide alignment required to grow beyond early-stage collaboration.

To address this tension, the Working Group recommends a hybrid approach that combines faculty-driven ideation with leadership-guided prioritization and investment. Interdisciplinary initiatives should originate from faculty collaboration and intellectual momentum, while institutional leadership plays a critical role in identifying which efforts demonstrate the greatest potential for impact, competitiveness, and alignment with university priorities.

This approach should be operationalized through a staged investment model that begins with a structured call for interdisciplinary proposals from faculty across the university. From this pool, a limited number of faculty-driven initiatives should be selected to receive modest, time-bound seed funding to test ideas, build collaborative teams, and generate proof of concept. From this initial cohort, a smaller subset of initiatives that demonstrate clear progress, external competitiveness, and the ability to scale should be advanced for more substantial, milestone-driven investment and institutional support. This model enables the university to remain responsive to emerging opportunities while ensuring that resources are concentrated on initiatives with demonstrated potential, without requiring the pre-selection of specific disciplines.

Attributes of Promising Interdisciplinary Initiatives

Based on its review of internal case studies, site visits, and working group discussions, the Working Group identified a set of characteristics that consistently define successful, scalable interdisciplinary research initiatives. These characteristics describe initiatives that are most well-positioned to benefit from targeted institutional investment and, in turn, to advance GW's research preeminence.

Across the initiatives reviewed, the Working Group observed that the most promising interdisciplinary efforts share the following attributes:

a. **Bottom-up, faculty-driven and invested interdisciplinary initiatives.** Initiatives emerge from faculty leadership and intellectual momentum, with demonstrated commitment from participating scholars rather than being created solely through top-down designation.

b. **A critical mass of engaged faculty with durable involvement.** Initiatives include a sufficient number of permanent faculty who are actively integrated into core research activities, ensuring continuity, depth, and the ability to sustain work over time.

c. **Meaningful interdisciplinarity.** Research integrates expertise either within disciplines or across disciplines in ways that create new insight or capability not achievable within a single field.

d. **Demonstrated and emerging ability to attract external funding.** Strong initiatives should demonstrate competitiveness across a diversified set of funding sources, including both federal and non-federal opportunities, while also showing clear alignment with specific non-federal funders whose missions match the collaboration's interdisciplinary strengths and impact goals.

e. **Identifiable pathways to sustained funding.** Initiatives have plausible, diversified funding pathways over time, rather than relying solely on one-time or short-term support.

f. **A credible administrative plan for pursuing diverse funding sources, including non-federal funding,** including access to sponsor-specific pre-award support, contracting expertise, and coordinated institutional relationship management.

g. **Alignment with core university values and mission.** Research reflects GW's institutional commitments, including scholarly excellence, public service, equity, and societal impact.

h. **Clear public or community benefit.** Initiatives articulate how their work contributes to broader societal needs, policy relevance, or community outcomes, consistent with GW's location and role.

i. **Alignment with national and global priorities.** Research addresses challenges or opportunity areas that are salient to national or international agendas, enhancing relevance and competitiveness.

j. **Production of impactful scholarship and recognition.** Initiatives contribute to research quality and visibility through:

    a. Growth in high-quality publications, citations, books, and outputs in leading venues.

    b. Increased recognition of faculty through prestigious awards, national academy memberships, or service in influential external roles.

c. Contributions to student success through research-engaged learning and curriculum development.

Three High-Potential Opportunity Areas for Focused Investment

The Working Group identified a small number of interdisciplinary domains that demonstrate strong alignment with the characteristics outlined above and are well-positioned for focused institutional investment. This assessment is supported by internal analysis of faculty activity, including the number of investigators publishing in these areas, which indicates a substantial and active base of faculty engagement across the university.

These areas are not intended to represent prescriptive or final investment decisions, but rather to illustrate areas where the university is already well-positioned to pursue larger-scale interdisciplinary initiatives through the structured, faculty-driven proposal and evaluation process outlined in this report. As such, they provide a set of evidence-based examples of where focused institutional investment could be most impactful if advanced through a transparent and inclusive selection process.

» **Trustworthy AI (TAI):** The GW Trustworthy AI Initiative is a faculty-driven interdisciplinary effort that brings together researchers from engineering, computer science, public policy, ethics, law, and related fields to address the technical, societal, and governance challenges associated with artificial intelligence. The Initiative has served as a proof point for staged, bottom-up interdisciplinary development, with faculty leadership at inception and growing institutional coordination over time, and has demonstrated strong alignment with national priorities, particularly around AI governance, security, and public trust.

  This staged development is reflected in the sequential success of two major federal investments. The first is the NSF DTAIS NRT (approximately $3 million through 2026), which supported early-stage interdisciplinary collaboration and training, with principal investigators initially located within SEAS and limited indirect cost recovery. This was followed by the NIST–NSF TRAILS Institute (approximately $20 million total, with $8 million at GW through 2028 and eligibility for renewal), which expanded the initiative to include co-principal investigators across multiple schools at GW, supported both research and course development across schools, and provided full indirect cost recovery.

  The faculty-driven coordination of the initial NRT effort was a key factor in GW's ability to secure the larger TRAILS Institute award. The Trustworthy AI Initiative is now being developed to institutionalize and scale the success of these investments, providing a platform for continued interdisciplinary collaboration, external engagement, and long-term growth. As such, TAI serves as a central proof point for how an interdisciplinary research ecosystem can function in practice and demonstrates that the proposed model is already delivering strong return on investment.

  While TAI demonstrates that GW can successfully develop and compete for large-scale interdisciplinary initiatives, its continued growth will depend on sustained institutional support. This includes coordinated research development, administrative infrastructure, and alignment with university priorities to ensure the Initiative can fully capitalize on existing investments, pursue renewal opportunities, and maintain national leadership in this space. Without continued support, there is a risk that the momentum generated by these major federal awards will not be fully sustained or leveraged.

» **Democracy Research (Institute for Data, Democracy, and Politics – IDDP):** Across the university, members of the GW faculty in CCAS, LAW, ESIA, and SEAS are dedicated to research that focuses on strengthening democracies at home in the United States and around the world. The evidence is compelling that GW's location can be leveraged, as well as faculty expertise, to uniquely position GW among its AAU peers to continue its measurable productivity, particularly in securing non-federally funded grants, increasing book publications, and earning appointments to nationally recognized academic societies such as the National Academy of Medicine, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, National Endowment for the Humanities fellowships, MacArthur Fellowships, the American Council of Learned Societies, and Phi Beta Kappa.

Examples of this work can be found across GW; however, the Institute for Data, Democracy, and Politics (IDDP) is an interdisciplinary research institute that integrates political science, data science, engineering, public health, communications, law, and policy analysis to study democratic institutions, information ecosystems, and political behavior. The Working Group viewed IDDP as an initiative that is approaching or operating at a mature stage, supported by a combination of major philanthropic funding, peer-reviewed research, cross-school principal investigators, and dedicated staff. IDDP was repeatedly cited as an example of meaningful interdisciplinarity with clear public and policy relevance, strong external visibility, and early success in attracting non-federal funding.

Despite these strengths, democracy research at GW remains relatively decentralized and would benefit from greater institutional coordination and strategic investment. Targeted support – particularly in research development, external engagement, and infrastructure – could strengthen collaboration across schools, expand access to large-scale funding opportunities, and elevate GW's visibility and leadership in this domain. Given GW's location and existing faculty strengths, this represents a significant opportunity for strategic growth.

» **Neuroscience:** Neuroscience research at GW demonstrates meaningful interdisciplinarity, integrating clinical and biomedical research with behavioral science, data analysis, and population-level perspectives. This integration allows faculty to pursue research questions that cannot be addressed within a single disciplinary lens, particularly at the intersection of brain science, health outcomes, and societal impact.

Interdisciplinary research in neuroscience at GW is characterized by bottom-up, faculty-driven collaboration that spans multiple schools and disciplines, including medicine, public health, psychology, engineering, and the social sciences. Rather than operating through a single centralized institute, neuroscience research at GW is distributed across departments, labs, and programs, reflecting a networked model of interdisciplinarity that has developed organically over time.

Finally, neuroscience research at GW aligns closely with the university's mission and national priorities, addressing pressing public health and scientific challenges while offering opportunities for research-engaged learning and cross-school collaboration. Neuroscience represents a promising opportunity area where targeted investment, improved coordination, and ecosystem-level supports could accelerate impact and help transform distributed strengths into a more cohesive, visible interdisciplinary enterprise.

The distributed nature of neuroscience research at GW, while enabling broad participation, also creates challenges for coordination, visibility, and scalability. Without more unified institutional support, opportunities for large-scale collaboration and external funding may remain

underrealized. Targeted investment in coordination, shared infrastructure, and research support could help connect existing efforts, strengthen competitiveness for major grants, and position GW as a more visible leader in interdisciplinary neuroscience research.

Each of these initiatives has evolved largely without the benefit of an intentionally designed, institution-wide interdisciplinary research ecosystem. Their success is therefore a testament to faculty ingenuity and perseverance rather than to systematic institutional enablement. With targeted investment and implementation of the recommendations outlined in this report, these and other promising initiatives are well positioned to scale further and to play a defining role in advancing GW's research impact and institutional preeminence.

Preliminary Data Support for Three High-Potential Interdisciplinary Research Areas

The Working Group was charged with considering ways to identify current areas of interdisciplinary research on the GW campus that display the essential characteristics and components of promising areas for further investment by the university, so that they might grow in national and international impact. We employed three methods to help with this aspect of the charge. In both cases, the methodological approaches and findings are preliminary and far from exhaustive. Yet, they support the finding of the Working Group that the university can claim at least three strong areas of interdisciplinary research, and with investment, could significantly advance the progress of our university along the "Path to Preeminence."

Exhibit A - OVPR Analysis Regarding Neuroscience and Trustworthy AI

Exhibit A shows the number of GW-affiliated faculty publishing across various research focus areas and identifies the number of GW publications produced by faculty whose work spans two or more fields of research. While the relative size of a research area does not, on its own, determine whether it is the right area for institutional investment, the substantial number of faculty engaged in neuroscience and artificial intelligence suggests that these fields warrant serious institutional consideration and support.

The faculty counts are drawn from grants, submissions, and publications. This data does not capture the relative level of effort required for different types of scholarly output, such as a book compared with a review article. However, it does provide a useful indicator of the overall size and breadth of the engaged research community. For that reason, this measure offers a stronger basis for understanding existing faculty activity than research funding amounts alone, though funding data is also available.

Exhibit B - Law School Democracy Data

Next, we considered a methodology that could help identify non-federally funded, interdisciplinary research strengths at GW. We used a Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) Model to perform Concept Mapping, using the responses (cleaned and de-identified) of the GW Law faculty in their 2024 annual reports. This Natural Language Processing (NLP) Model was used to determine latent structures that served as the basis for creating the network Concept Map, shown in Exhibit B of Appendix 3.

Exhibit B provides a visualization of the interdisciplinary research network linkages across the Law School in 2024. The centrality of the core themes, the number of lines connecting those themes, and the thickness of the lines should be interpreted as to the strength of faculty interest and the number of faculty working in those thematic areas, with cross-connections shown. We interpret this as strong

support for the conclusion of the Working Group that within the Law School, interdisciplinary study of democracy - specifically the constitutional structures, rights, and impacts of laws that pertain to democracy - is a thriving field of interdisciplinary research at GW Law. We expect that such research methods, when replicated in a similar manner across the campus more broadly, would find the strength of interdisciplinary study of democracy as a core area of thematic focus at GW.

Exhibit C - American Studies Themes from Book Publications

Finally, we ran an analysis of interdisciplinary themes that came up in the publications reported in Dimensions for 2025 using Gemini 3. The themes that resulted from this analysis are included below in Exhibit C. Exhibit D summarizes a more nuanced department-level analysis of American Studies. We examined the many books published by the American Studies Department, as described on the publishers' websites, and the results produced a topic model of the top ten themes. These themes were then combined with the topics that emerged from the Law School analysis in Exhibit B. The combined results are shown in Exhibit D of Appendix 3.





APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Center, Institutes, and Initiatives Presentations

The Working Group heard presentations from faculty leaders of the following eight GW research institutes, centers, and initiatives currently conducting interdisciplinary research at GW. We selected this representative sample after the Working Group reviewed the 60 institutes and centers listed at research.gwu.edu/research-centers-and-institutes, and considered recommendations from the working group members. Each guest leader was generally asked to address the following two questions:

- Please describe the work and history of your research institute with a focus on the university's structural supports that have been most meaningful in your growth and the success of your research mission.
- Please describe the institutional barriers you have overcome to grow to your present state. What can the university do to support your institute and others to help you to sustain and grow your research mission in the future?

1. **Institute for Data, Democracy and Politics, Professor Catie Bailard and Professor Ethan Porter**
   November 6, 2025
2. **GW Trustworthy AI Initiative, Director, Professor Zoe Szajnfarber**
   November 21, 2025
3. **GW Cancer Center, Associate Director, Dr. Alison Hall**
   December 19, 2025
4. **District of Columbia Center for AIDS Research (DC CFAR), Professor Manya Magnus**
   January 15, 2026
5. **Institute for Socioeconomic Opportunity, Executive Director, Professor Wendy Ellis**
   January 29, 2026
6. **Global Women's Institute, Executive Director, Dr. Mary Ellsberg**
   January 29, 2026
7. **Global Food Institute, Carbonell Family Executive Director, Stacy Dean**
   February 13, 2026
8. **GW Alliance for a Sustainable Future, Executive Director, Professor Frank Sesno**
   February 13, 2026

Appendix 2: Lessons Learned During Northeastern University Site Visit

Executive Summary

Leaders of the GW Interdisciplinary Research Ecosystem Working Group, together with David Broniatowski and Caitlin Grady, visited Northeastern University on February 18, 2026. The purpose of the trip was to learn from that institution's experience in designing and sustaining structures, policies, and support mechanisms that enable and accelerate interdisciplinary research. The visit provided an opportunity to explore how Northeastern organizes leadership, incentives, administrative supports, and research development functions to foster collaboration across disciplines, colleges, and external partners. Insights gained from these discussions will help to inform GW's ongoing efforts to strengthen its own interdisciplinary research ecosystem, identify effective practices that can be adapted to our institutional context, and enhance the support provided to faculty and research teams engaged in complex, cross-cutting research initiatives.

Northeastern's experience demonstrates that transformative interdisciplinary growth requires both decisive leadership and strong governance. Clear "tone at the top"—visible prioritization, direct alignment with senior leadership, and a culture of empowerment—enabled rapid expansion of institutes, industry partnerships, and research funding. At the same time, their challenges highlight the importance of early attention to governance: transparent financial models, well-defined roles for Deans, standardized joint appointment and promotion frameworks, and scalable administrative infrastructure. For GW, the key lesson is not only how to replicate Northeastern's bold, leadership-driven success, but how to pair that ambition with durable governance structures that ensure sustainability and minimize institutional friction.

Primary Take-away Lessons

- Northeastern University (NU) has chosen to locate its interdisciplinary research in institutes and centers rather than in individual schools or colleges. Institutes at NU are "identity-shaping hubs" that define the university's global reputation and thematic focus (e.g., the Network Science Institute).
- Nevertheless, faculty leaders of institutes and centers remain located in a school or college for tenure and promotion purposes.
- Beyond "dollars and cents," there is a need for better metrics to measure "traceability to mission"—evaluating how research impacts society, student job placement, and institutional identity.
- Ideas for interdisciplinary collaborations originate with faculty from the "bottom up," but are incentivized with centralized funding and support that is administered from the "top down."
- NU-RES is the large and well-resourced central organization that administers the entire life cycle of NU research including large, interdisciplinary grants. NU-RES has a staff of 20 who find funding, help develop proposals, review agreements, set up, manage, and close out projects for researchers across the entire university.

» In addition to NU-RES which acts as a "hub," the schools and colleges with large research portfolios (e.g. Colleges of Science, Social Science, Computer Science, and Engineering) each have 3-5 additional research support staff to develop and manage research projects locally.

» Managing sensitive or classified federal research requires a separate legal and physical infrastructure to protect the broader university while enabling high-security partnerships.

» NU's Senior Leadership Team (the SLT) determines which interdisciplinary projects receive central university investment based on the university's capacity, and university leadership's priorities.

» The SLT reviews research project "pitches" looking for faculty collaborations with "spark" to lead, attract external funding, and align with university priorities. While NU excels at recruiting external "stars" to lead institutes, there is no formal internal pipeline or mentoring system to develop future institute leaders from within the existing faculty.

» Selected interdisciplinary projects share indirects under MOU's that are unique to each institute, but generally split 40% to the college/faculty, 40% to the institute, and 20% to the university. There is no "cookie-cutter" MOU, and not all are honored in times of financial exigency. Bespoke MOUs can lead to confusion over oversight, resource allocation, and accountability.

» Provost supports interdisciplinary research by financing the first year of salary for hires jointly proposed by college deans; awarding space in the ISEC (interdisciplinary science facility); and creating bespoke agreements to share indirects. The university spends an estimated $150 million per year to support institutes and centers.

» Pain Points at NU include tension between administration and deans and their faculty who perceive resources being taken away from their units to fund institutes; difficulty closing out unproductive institutes; and advancing ideas too quickly before sufficient infrastructure is in place.

» A critical driver of success is a cultural shift in central administration from "reflexive procedural resistance" to a "solutions-oriented" mindset. This "tone at the top" reduces faculty uncertainty and accelerates the speed of research.

Detailed Summary

The meeting with senior leadership at Northeastern University offers GW a valuable case study in how to build a high-impact interdisciplinary research ecosystem at scale—and how to stabilize it once success begins to accelerate. For the GW Interdisciplinary Ecosystem Working Group, the central lesson is not simply that Northeastern's institute model has worked. It clearly has. The deeper lesson is that transformative growth requires both unmistakable leadership direction and carefully engineered governance. Northeastern's experience demonstrates the power of "tone at the top" in catalyzing change, while also revealing that long-term sustainability depends on strong, transparent, and thoughtfully designed institutional structures.

Over the past several years, Northeastern has made deliberate, visible "big bets" on interdisciplinary institutes as a defining institutional strategy. Beginning with the Network Science Institute, the university elevated interdisciplinary entities from peripheral centers to identity-shaping institutes. These units were not simply collaborative add-ons; they were positioned as thematic hubs intended to define what Northeastern would be known for. Institutes were aligned directly with the Provost, signaling that interdisciplinary research was central to institutional ambition.

This clarity of direction mattered. Senior leadership communicated unambiguous objectives and backed them with authority, access, and resources. Throughout the discussion, Northeastern leaders emphasized the importance of "tone at the top"—a culture in which leadership is responsive, solutions-oriented, and willing to empower initiative. There is now a direct line of communication between institute leadership and senior administration. People "get back to you." Challenges are met with a "say yes" posture rather than reflexive procedural resistance. That tone reduces uncertainty, accelerates decision-making, and signals institutional priority. **As a result, faculty feel that their contributions are valued.**

The results have been tangible. Institutes scaled rapidly, with staff growth described as moving from "2 to 5 to 18." Industry engagement expanded from initially sparse relationships to extensive collaboration, supported by both direct partnerships and federal grants. Major center awards were secured. Budgets in some areas reached substantial annual levels. Selective external hires brought prestige and visibility. At least one major center transitioned formally into institute status in 2025, reflecting both symbolic and structural maturation. Central research infrastructure supported this expansion: Northeastern Research Enterprise Services (NURES) provides coordinated pre- and post-award support, workshops for major federal competitions such as NSF CAREER, DoD, and NIH, and assistance with international funding mechanisms like Horizon Europe. The Kostas Research Institute (KRI) operates as a separate legal entity to manage classified research, enabling engagement with sensitive federal projects while protecting the broader university enterprise.

Taken together, this represents a coherent institutional transformation. Northeastern's interdisciplinary strategy has grown its research portfolio, strengthened industry integration, and reinforced its reputation. For GW, the first and clearest takeaway is that visible, sustained leadership commitment is indispensable. **Ambiguity at the top produces drift; clarity produces momentum.**

At the same time, Northeastern's experience illustrates that rapid success introduces predictable strains if governance structures do not evolve in parallel. The most persistent theme beneath the surface of the discussion was tension between institutes and Deans—particularly around authority, oversight, and financial flows. Because institutes report to the Provost and retain a significant share of indirect costs (IDCs)—sometimes around 40 percent—they operate with a degree of autonomy and visibility that can shift traditional power dynamics. Funds historically associated with colleges now flow in part to interdisciplinary units. Even when total research dollars grow, the redistribution of overhead can feel zero-sum without transparency and clear guiding principles.

This recurring tension prompted me to introduce the concept of "middle-out" leadership during the discussion, suggesting that sustainable interdisciplinary success requires active engagement and ownership from Deans—not merely top-down endorsement from central administration. That framing did not originate organically from Northeastern leadership; it was raised deliberately to probe an issue that surfaced repeatedly in their comments. Similarly, I asked, "If you were back at the beginning, what would you change to avoid the turbulence?" That question was intended to move beyond a narrative of success and to elicit reflection on structural challenges. The answers suggested that **while leadership clarity was strong from the outset, governance frameworks could have been more systematically engineered in parallel.**

Faculty hiring and joint appointments illustrate this point clearly. Approximately 20 percent of faculty seats are joint appointments, often governed by bespoke memoranda of understanding. This flexibility enabled interdisciplinary growth, but it also contributed to perceptions of "adhocracy." Without standardized frameworks, ambiguity arises around oversight, resource allocation, and promotion and tenure (P&T). Some Deans expressed concern that holding a minority stake in a joint appointment can feel like "rubber stamping" decisions made elsewhere. There is also a structural risk that split reporting lines can dilute accountability or create opportunities for strategic navigation between units. Northeastern's experience suggests that **while joint appointments are essential to interdisciplinary ecosystems, they require clear, consistent, and transparent governance structures from the outset.**

Promotion and incentive alignment present another critical lesson. Some of Northeastern's research efforts emphasize translation, industry engagement, and measurable societal impact—often framed in terms of ensuring that students "get jobs" and that research achieves real-world adoption. However, traditional academic reward systems remain strongly anchored in discipline-based criteria. If interdisciplinary collaboration and translational engagement are not explicitly recognized within P&T standards, cultural change stalls. Northeastern is actively grappling with this alignment challenge. For GW, the implication is direct: interdisciplinary ambition must be matched with explicit policy alignment. Cultural aspiration alone is insufficient.

Financial sustainability is similarly instructive. While IDC retention empowered institutes and accelerated growth, leadership acknowledged that the current budget model is not fully sustainable in its present form. The lesson for GW is not to avoid bold financial commitments, but to ensure that revenue-sharing mechanisms are transparent, predictable, and perceived as fair. If interdisciplinary growth is to expand the overall "pie" rather than redistribute it, that expansion must be demonstrable and clearly communicated.

Operational infrastructure also lagged growth in some areas. Space constraints, staff retention, and the need for high-level specialized administrative support surfaced as concerns. Research development offices operate with a mix of specialists and generalists, but without always having explicit prioritization processes. Northeastern's success demonstrates that infrastructure can scale quickly under strong leadership; its challenges demonstrate that infrastructure must scale deliberately and sustainably. **Faculty need clarity, reliable support, and reduced uncertainty if interdisciplinary ecosystems are to mature.**

Another emerging theme is measurement. Grant totals are straightforward metrics of growth, but leaders acknowledged the difficulty of demonstrating "traceability" to mission—measuring social impact, translational success, and institutional identity beyond dollars. As institutes become brand-defining entities, evaluation systems must capture more than funding volume. This is an area where GW can benefit from early metric design rather than retrofitting measurement after scaling.

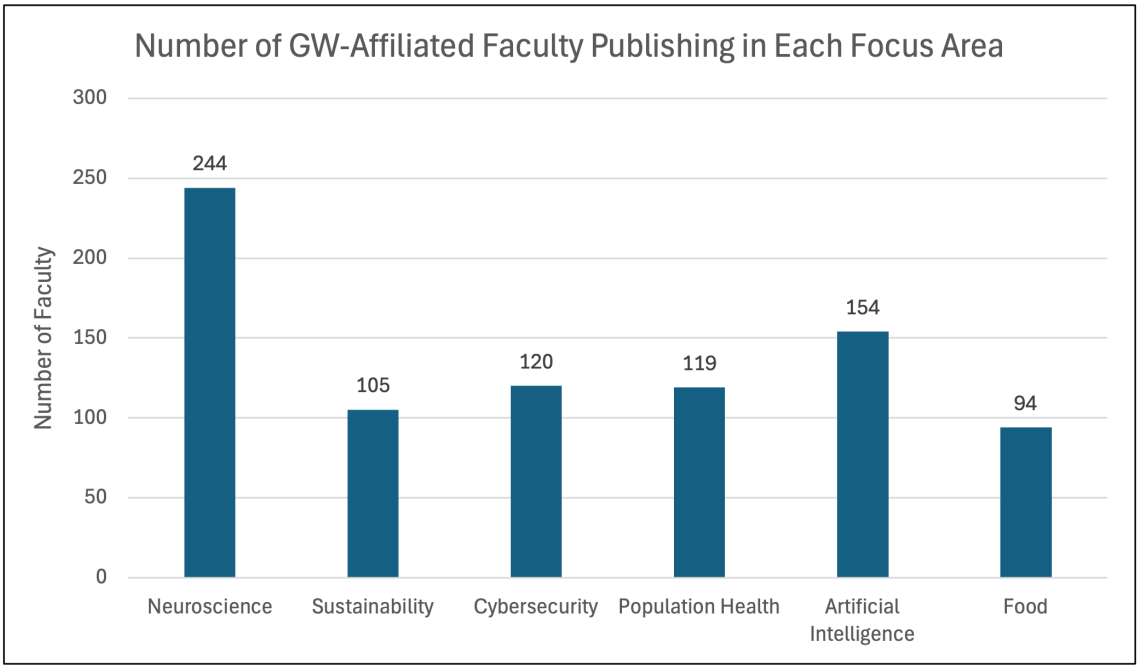
Northeastern's experience also highlights the central importance of institute leadership in driving interdisciplinary success. Effective leaders in this context are not merely strong administrators; they are institution-builders. They articulate a clear vision, inspire confidence, reduce uncertainty, and create an environment in which people feel empowered to act. They are not parochial or siloed in their thinking, but instead operate with a university-wide perspective, balancing disciplinary excellence with cross-cutting ambition. They model collaboration rather than territoriality and are willing to solve problems rather than defer them. At the same time, there does not appear to be a clearly defined internal pipeline for cultivating and mentoring future institute leaders. Leadership succession seems to rely heavily on external hires, often bringing in established figures from outside the university rather than systematically developing talent from within. While this strategy can inject visibility and momentum, it also suggests an opportunity—for Northeastern and for GW—to think more intentionally about mentoring, succession planning, and leadership development as part of building a sustainable interdisciplinary ecosystem.

What emerges from Northeastern's story is not a cautionary tale but a growth narrative. Their success demonstrates that when senior leadership provides clear objectives, visible backing, and a culture of empowerment, interdisciplinary transformation can occur rapidly and at scale. Their challenges demonstrate that governance—financial transparency, defined authority, standardized appointment frameworks, aligned incentives, scalable infrastructure—is what stabilizes that transformation over time.

For GW, the path forward does not require choosing between bold leadership and careful governance. Northeastern's experience suggests that we need both from the outset. Strong "tone at the top" can catalyze momentum, signal institutional priority, and reduce hesitation. At the same time, good governance can prevent friction from undermining progress, align Deans as middle-out partners, ensure financial sustainability, clarify faculty expectations, and reduce uncertainty. If we internalize both lessons, we can replicate the dynamism of Northeastern's interdisciplinary ascent while minimizing avoidable turbulence. Leadership provides vision and acceleration. Governance provides the structure and durability. Together, they offer a roadmap for building an interdisciplinary ecosystem that is both ambitious and sustainable.

Appendix 3: OVPR, CCAS, and LAW Data Examining Sample Key Indicators of Interdisciplinary Research at GW

Exhibit A



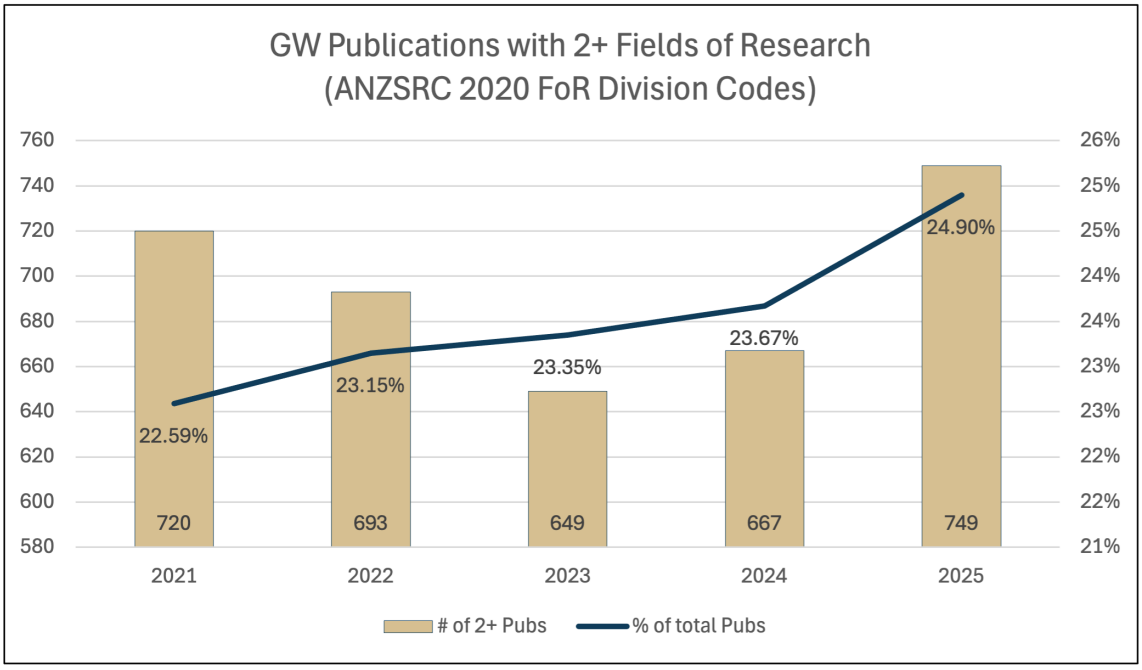


Exhibit B

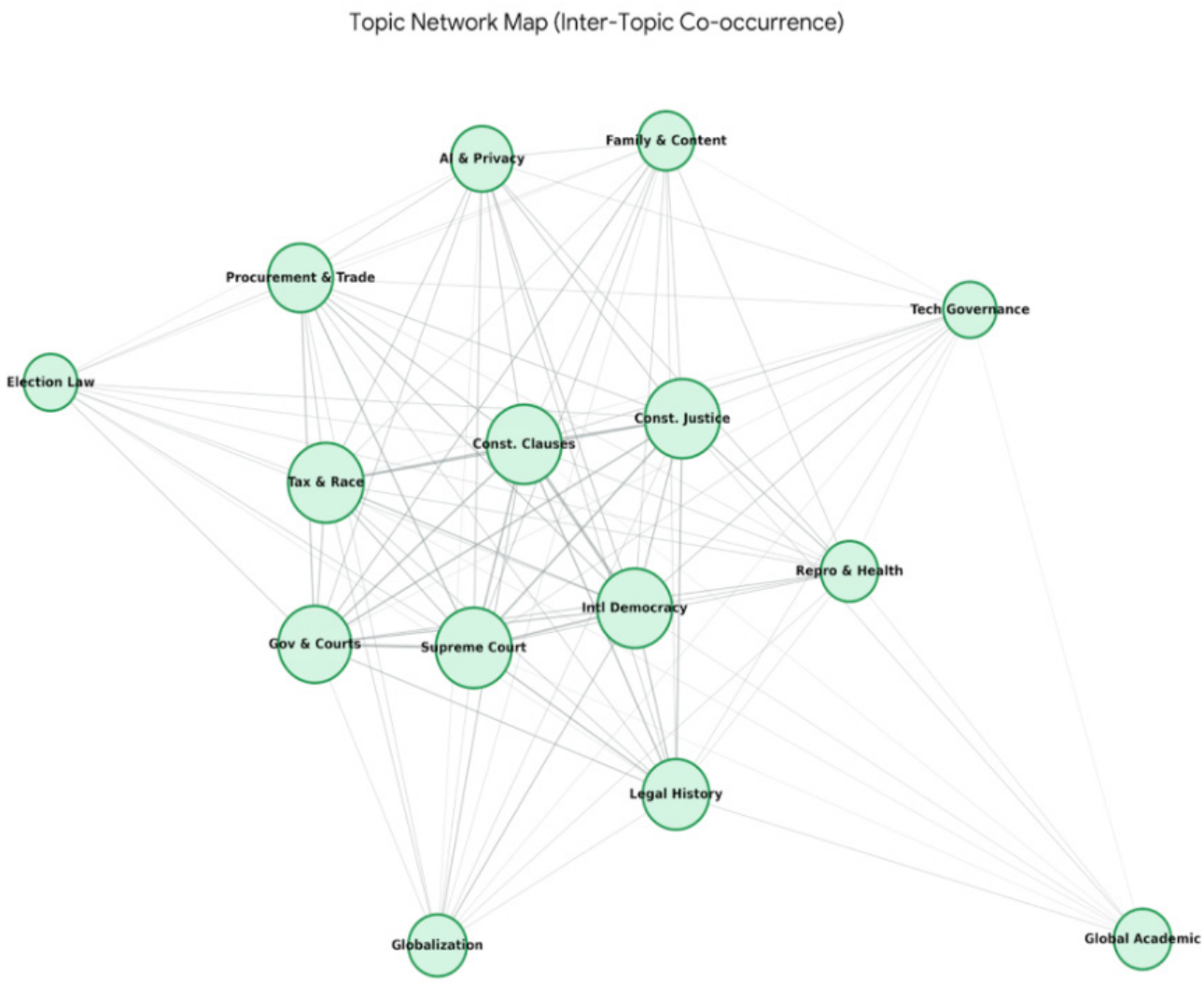

Topic Network Map (Inter-Topic Co-occurrence)
AI & Privacy
Family & Content
Procurement & Trade
Tech Governance
Election Law
Const. Justice
Const. Clauses
Tax & Race
Repro & Health
Intl Democracy
Gov & Courts
Supreme Court
Legal History
Globalization
Global Academic

Exhibit C

Themes from American Studies Book Publications

» **Race & White Supremacy:** The most dominant theme, appearing across nearly every entry. Books examine racial hierarchies, racial classification, white supremacy structures, and the experiences of Black, Asian American, Latino, and immigrant communities in the US.

» **American Freedom & Democracy:** Several books interrogate the concept of freedom in liberal American democracy, exploring its entanglement with exploitation, sovereignty, and political power

» **Civil Rights & Racial Justice Movements:** The history and legacy of civil rights activism runs throughout, from WWII-era desegregation efforts to Black freedom struggles and contemporary Palestinian liberation movements.

» **US Foreign Policy & the Middle East:** how popular culture and religion shape American engagement with the Middle East, from Cold War politics to the Gaza war.

» **Music, Culture & Social Justice:** A strong thread connects Black music (soul, gospel, folk, children's music) to political activism and community-building,

» **Immigration & Ethnic Identity:** Books examine how immigrant groups (Italians, Latinos, Asian Americans) navigate racial identity and classification in American cities and institutions.

» **Religion & Evangelicalism:** Conservative Christianity, missionary activity, Cold War religious politics, and global evangelicalism are explored, particularly through the lens of race and empire.

» **Urbanism & Gentrification:** The transformation of American cities — especially gentrification in Brooklyn, slumming in New York and Chicago, and the rise of warehouses in global capitalism — features prominently.

» **Gender, Sexuality & Queer Identity**: LGBTQ themes weave through multiple books, including queer Black women in music history, feminist political theory, and the politics of care in Asian American communities.

» **Cold War Politics, Science, & American Identity:** Several books examine how Cold War-era culture shaped political centrism, cognitive science, anti-communism, and the national self-image — particularly around concepts of open-mindedness and freedom.

Exhibit D

Themes that emerge by intersecting extracted American Studies Foci with Foci extracted from the Law School

» **Race, White Supremacy & Health Disparities:** Racial hierarchies, white supremacy structures, and the experiences of marginalized communities appear in both lists. List B adds a clinical dimension, examining how race and ethnicity intersect with health outcomes, social determinants of health, and access to treatment.

» **American Freedom, Democracy & Social Justice** freedom in liberal democracy and its entanglement with exploitation, socio-legal studies focused on power dynamics, marginalized populations, and human rights.

» **Civil Rights, Racial Justice & Gender Equity** Civil rights activism and focus on gender and power, sexual harassment of immigrant workers, and barriers faced by refugee populations.

» **Immigration, Ethnic Identity & Integration** racial classification in cities and egal barriers to integration and the experiences of immigrant workers.

» **Gender, Sexuality & Queer Identity** LGBTQ themes, feminist political theory, and the politics of care in marginalized communities, particularly queer Black women and Asian American communities.

» **Urbanism, Gentrification & Political Economy** city transformation and economics themes around market dynamics, sustainability, and the political economy of urban and energy policy.

» **Applied Science, Behavioral Research & Public Policy** intersection of data science, psychology, and medicine, including AI applications, behavioral interventions, and cognitive health research at GW.

Appendix 4: Working Group Members

The Interdisciplinary Research Ecosystem Working Group was co-chaired by:

- **Dayna Bowen Matthew**, Dean, GW Law
- **Robert Miller**, Former Interim Vice President for Research

The following individuals* served as members of the Interdisciplinary Research Ecosystem Working Group and were integral to the development of this report:

- **Susan Aaronson**, Professor; Director, Digital Trade and Data Governance Hub, ESI
- **Lorien Abroms**, Professor of Prevention and Community Health; Associate Dean for Academic Graduate Programs, GWSPH
- **David Broniatowski**, Professor of Engineering Management and Systems Engineering, SEAS
- **Tyson Brown**, Associate Dean of Undergraduate Admissions, Enrollment and Student Success
- **Shawneequa Callier**, Associate Professor, Clinical Research and Leadership, SMHS
- **Jamie Cohen-Cole**, Department Chair of American Studies; Associate Professor of American Studies, CCAS
- **Matthew Colonnese**, Professor, Pharmacology and Physiology, SMHS
- **Laura Engel**, Professor of International Education and International Affairs, GSEHD
- **Adrienne Fowler**, Assistant Dean for Privacy and Technology Law, GW Law
- **Mardi Gomberg-Maitland**, Professor of Medicine and Medical Director, Pulmonary Hypertension Program, SMHS
- **Christopher Goss**, Associate Vice President, Financial Management for Schools, Athletics, and GSEHD, Finance
- **Alison Hall**, Associate Dean for Research, SMHS
- **Oleg Kargaltsev**, Professor of Physics, CCAS
- **Matthew Kay**, Professor, Biomedical Engineering, SEAS
- **Brandon Kohrt**, Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health, SMHS
- **Tian Lan**, Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering, SEAS
- **Miguel Lejeune**, Professor of Decision Science, GWSB
- **Chris Mores**, Associate Dean for Research, GWSPH

» **Christine Pintz**, Associate Dean for Research, SON

» **Ethan Porter**, Associate Professor, Media and Public Affairs, CCAS

» **Laurie Posey**, Associate Professor, SON

» **John Ralls**, Customer Engagement and Service Enhancement Specialist, Safety and Operations

» **Michael Rand**, Assistant Dean for Business and Finance Law, GW Law

» **Laura Richman**, Associate Professor, Social Science and Health Law, GW Law

» **Kausik Sarkar**, Professor of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering, SEAS

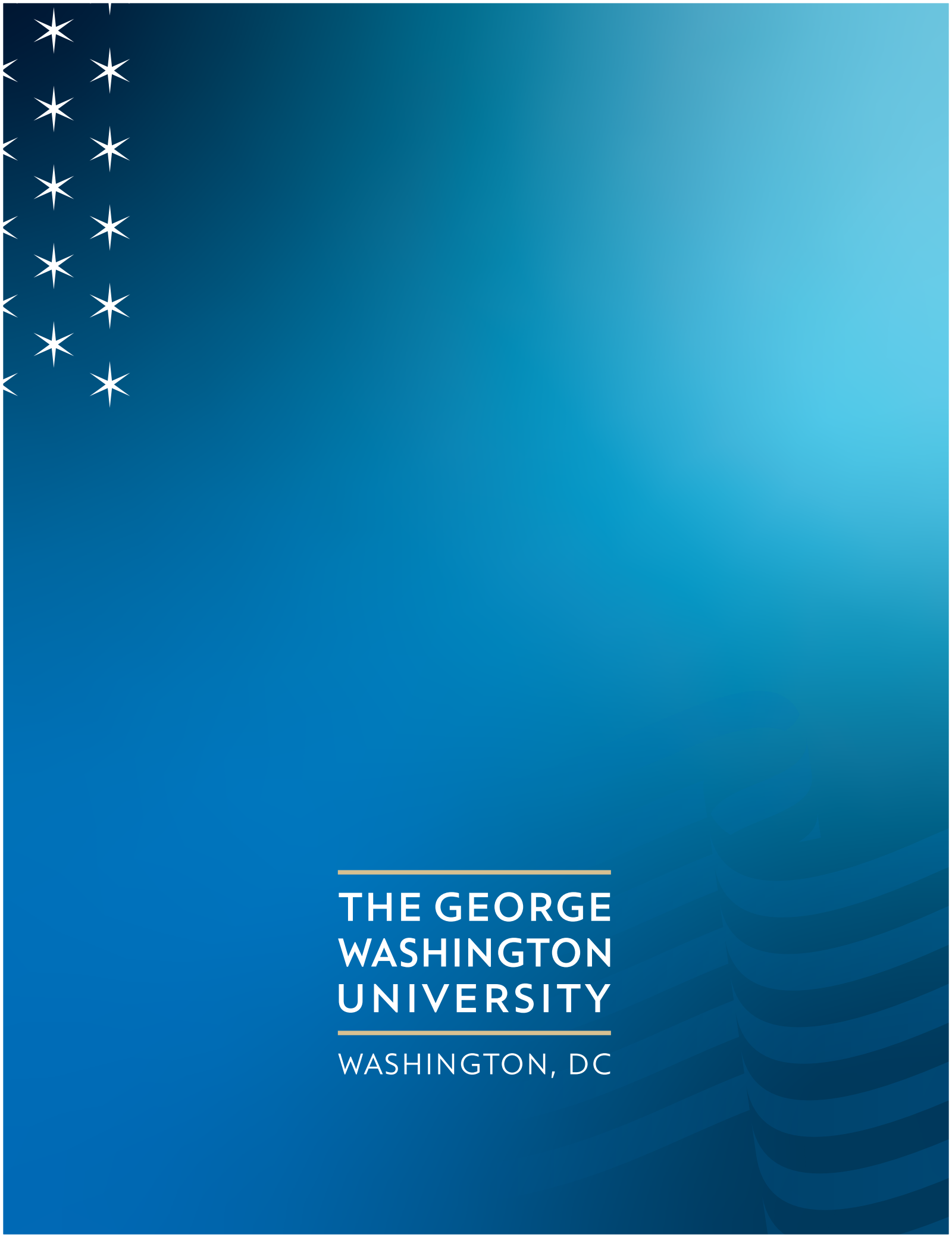
» **Catie Snow-Bailard**, Associate Professor of Media and Public Affairs, CCAS

» **Annette Thomson**, Executive Director, Web and Mobile Strategy, OCM

» **Scott White**, Program Director, Cybersecurity BPS; Associate Professor, CPS

**Names and titles reflect those in place at the time of the Working Group's work.*




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