

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS (RFP): Evaluation of the Gulf Futures Design Studios

The Gulf Research Program (GRP) of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) is issuing a Request for Proposal (RFP) to seek a Contractor to evaluate the process, outcomes and future directions of the Gulf Futures Interdisciplinary Design Studios (GFDS).

A maximum total budget of \$400,000 is available for this funding opportunity.



BUSINESS OBJECTIVES

The Gulf Futures Interdisciplinary Design Studio Program or Gulf Future Design Studios (GFDS) (GFDS) is at a critical midpoint— enough has been implemented to generate meaningful insights, and there is still time to apply those insights to strengthen the next two years of this second phase through real-time feedback and learning. Early evaluation will allow us to identify what’s working, for whom and under what contexts, where adjustments are needed, and how well the program is making progress towards its goals and intended impact. By evaluating now, we can determine the strategic value and legacy of the GFDS and make informed decisions about its future sustainability, scalability, cross-institutional synergies, and alignment with the Gulf Research Program (GRP) mission.

PROGRAM BACKGROUND

The GFDS is a multi-institution, series of interdisciplinary design studio courses within accredited architecture schools in higher education institutions in the Gulf States. The GFDS originated in conversations with stakeholders in the Gulf region and the GRP Division Committee to prepare the next generation of architects, designers, and professionals in urban development related areas with the capacity to identify, visualize, explore, and propose design thinking and interdisciplinary solutions to critical local and regional issues in the Gulf region—examples of topics grantees have worked on include rebuilding Cedar Key, Florida to withstand future hurricane damage and rising sea levels, and developing natural infrastructure projects that can address problems like flooding and habitat loss in coastal communities in Alabama. The program includes a set of design studio courses and research activities that use design thinking as the foundational pedagogical approach for students to better understand and address issues at the intersection of three focus areas - the Future of Energy Systems, Future of Environmental Change along the Gulf Coast, and the Future of Healthy and Resilient Communities. The course is an intensive, ~12-hour per week program in classroom settings.

Following an initial pilot phase (2022-2024), the GFDS was expanded in Fall 2024 to a sustained phase two, three-year multi-institution activity that builds from and includes accredited architectural schools in higher education institutions: five participating pilot institutions in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi, and three additional institutions in Texas.

EVALUATION PURPOSE AND SCOPE

Purpose of Evaluation

This evaluation will serve as the first comprehensive look at Phase 1 (2022-2024) and Phase 2 (2024-2027) of the GFDS. We intend this evaluation to provide a high-level look at the process, outcomes, and forward directions for the GFDS. The GFDS evaluation will be designed as an

evaluation of the program and not an evaluation of the individual participating institutions under the program.

The GFDS program is intentionally non-prescriptive, with each of the eight sites adapting it to fit their unique context. As such, the evaluation must account for this fluidity and apply a realist lens—examining what works, for whom, in what contexts, and how. These insights will be essential for informing future scalability by highlighting diverse implementation strategies and transferable lessons across institutions.

Evaluation Scope

It is anticipated that the evaluator will conduct the evaluation using the four research methods described below; however, the GRP welcomes proposals that describe the approach and methods you believe would best meet the evaluation objectives outlined in this RFP.

- A **process evaluation** to understand how the program is being implemented across participating institutions, including the different approaches sites are taking, and to identify the unique challenges, barriers, and enabling factors shaping implementation—ultimately to support refinement and strengthening of the program in its final two years and beyond.
- An **outcomes evaluation** to assess the outcomes, value and impacts of the GFDS on students, faculty, institutions, and the region.
- A set of **case studies** that illustrate real-world outcomes and stakeholder experiences. These case studies will combine qualitative insights, participant voices, and contextual data to illustrate the program’s value proposition.
- An **analysis of future directions** to inform the sustainability, scalability, and strategic evolution of GFIDS beyond 2027, serving as a foundational tool to guide the design and development of a potential Phase 3 of the program.

The observed measurable outcomes of the GFDS at the system and individual level will need to be considered. However, the GRP acknowledges that there are methodological challenges in conducting an evaluation of a multi-grant program like the GFDS. For example, institutions may have diverse objectives and activities, varied timelines, and inconsistent data capture, making it difficult to attribute outcomes to specific projects or to draw consistent conclusions across the entire program. To counter these challenges, it is expected that the evaluator will draw upon mixed data sources and where feasible, will use that data to report on findings and to provide comment on any observed outcomes and emerging trends.

The following areas are considered out of scope of this evaluation:

- A comparison of program results against a baseline (2022), as a definitive baseline measurement was not undertaken prior to implementation of the GFDS.

- A randomized controlled trial (RCT), as the GFDS, is a multi-institutional, place-based, and collaborative program, not a single, standardized treatment that can be randomly assigned.
- A detailed cost benefit analysis to determine value for money.
- Trend analysis due to lack of targets.
- Evaluations of all individual institutions under the program (however, two-three case studies will need to be considered).

Prospective Evaluation Questions

The evaluation should address the following overarching prospective evaluation questions which will be refined and finalized in collaboration with the selected evaluator.

1. How is the GFDS being implemented across sites, and how effectively are program structures, partnerships, and practices supporting its delivery across participating institutions?
 - a. To what extent have participating institutions implemented the core elements of the GFDS (e.g., annual studio courses, interdisciplinary collaboration, community interactions), and how are the models different across institutions?
 - b. Are students, faculty, and communities being reached as intended?
 - c. What factors support or hinder implementation, including institutional structures, resources, or contextual challenges?
2. What measurable impacts has the GFDS achieved, and to what extent has it contributed to the intended outcomes for students, faculty, institutions, and communities?
 - a. For whom, in what ways, and in what circumstances did outcomes occur?
 - b. What unintended outcomes – positive or negative – emerged from the program?
 - c. What aspects of the program design or delivery were most influential?
3. What elements of the GFDS are most valuable, scalable, and sustainable, and how can the program's structure and network evolve to ensure long-term relevance and alignment with GRP's mission beyond the funding period?
 - a. What steps have institutions taken to embed the GFDS program within their faculties or academic structures, and what plans or intentions do they have to sustain or expand the program long-term—such as through formal integration into degree pathways, certificate programs, or new academic offerings?
 - b. Which elements of the program were most valuable to institutions, faculty, students, and community partners, and why? What features or activities should be prioritized or preserved in future iterations?
 - c. What conditions, strategies, or institutional supports are needed to sustain GFDS beyond GRP funding?
 - d. Which components of GFDS show potential for adaptation or replication in other regions or educational contexts, and how might these inform the design and strategic focus of a potential Phase 3 of the program?

Evaluation Deliverables and Timeline

The GRP expects to partner with an evaluation team, beginning July 2025 and continuing through September 2027. Below is a tentative timeline of proposed activities and deliverables. During the evaluation, the evaluator will meet with the GRP on a regular basis to provide progress updates, including status of key project milestones, risks and mitigation strategies, and expenditure of contract funds.

Phase	Timeframe	Key Activities	Deliverables
Year 1: Process Evaluation and Foundation- Building	July 2025 – July 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evaluation planning and kickoff - In person attendance at annual GFDS Director’s meeting in Irvine, CA, week beginning 6-8 August - Initial site or virtual visits - Student and faculty surveys (pre/post) - Interviews and focus groups - Documentation review - Begin social network and community interactions mapping - Learning and feedback loops with GRP staff and the GFDS institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Comprehensive Evaluation Plan (Sep 2025) including evaluation questions, data collection methods and analysis, sampling strategy, proposed case studies, timeline, and limitations. - Mid-Term Evaluation Report (June/July 2026) with recommendations on mid-course adjustments - Presentation of mid-term findings (June/July 2026)
Years 2 and 3: Outcome Evaluation and Future Directions	August 2026 – September 2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Final student/faculty surveys (pre/post) - Follow-up interviews and focus groups - Update network and engagement maps - Finalize case studies - Synthesis of findings - Strategic reflection sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Draft Final Evaluation Report (July 2027) - Case Studies / Success Stories to be incorporated into Final Report (August 2027) - Final Evaluation Report (September 2027) with actionable recommendations and storytelling to share program results - Executive Summary (September 2027) - Final Presentation (September 2027)

Expectations on Deliverables

The final evaluation report should be designed as a **strategic, public-facing document** that communicates the most significant findings and insights from the GFDS program. Rather than taking the form of a traditional academic or technical report, the deliverable should adopt a format similar to a business case- translating evaluation evidence into accessible language and framing that can inform decision-making by a range of stakeholders. The report should present a clear, evidence-informed account of the program's implementation, emerging outcomes, and operational value, including any indications of return on investment where data allow. Throughout, the evaluation should uphold principles of rigor, transparency, and balanced analysis.

The report should be **visually engaging and professionally formatted**, incorporating infographics, graphs, tables, and design elements – where appropriate- to enhance clarity and accessibility for a broad audience. The tone and format should be appropriate for use with public stakeholders, decision-makers, and funders. Wherever appropriate, the report should include **short case studies, success stories, or profiles** that illustrate real-world outcomes and stakeholder experiences.

Offerors may wish to include a **communications or design partner** in their proposal to support the effective presentation and dissemination of the report. Alternatively, the GRP communications team may be able to assist with the design components. This can be discussed further and finalized during the initial planning stage. Your proposal should clearly articulate whether you will be able to meet these requirements either internally or by subcontracting a design partner. If your budget does not allow for this, that should also be clearly indicated in your submission.

Examples of visually engaging evaluation reports that reflect the style and presentation we are aiming to achieve are presented in Appendix A.

Evaluation data

The evaluator should submit a copy of any dataset created or obtained in performance of this award to GRP in a machine-readable, non-proprietary format. The dataset should be organized and documented for use by those not fully familiar with the evaluation project. The evaluator(s) is encouraged to review GRP's [data management policy](#).

Research Involving Human Subjects

All projects involving human subjects must be submitted to an institutional review board (IRB) for review and either receive IRB approval or be granted exemption from human subjects' regulations before an award can be made. Where possible, proposers should file their proposal with their local IRB at the same time as the proposal is submitted to the GRP so that any approval procedure determined as necessary will not delay the award process. A proposal may be submitted to the

GRP prior to receiving IRB approval or being granted exemption; however, if the proposal is selected for funding, the award will be made conditional upon IRB granting approval or exemption from human subjects' regulations within 60 days of the notice of conditional award. If a proposed project involving human subjects is granted exemption from human subjects' regulations, the applicant must provide documentation that an IRB has declared the project exempt from the human subjects' regulations. Documentation should include the specific category justifying the exemption. Organizations without internal access to an IRB must seek approval or exemption from an independent review board or other appropriate authority. Visit our website for more [information about human subjects' regulations](#).

PROPOSALS

Budget

The GRP's target budget for this effort is a maximum of \$400,000, with value for money being a criterion in selecting an evaluator.

Evaluation Criteria

Information relevant to these criteria may be presented within the normal format of the proposal in response to this RFP. The criteria will be uniformly applied in the evaluation of the proposals.

Criteria	Weight
Understanding of the evaluation goals, scope and expectations	10
Evaluation design and methodology, including stakeholder engagement strategy	30
Timeline and milestones (including reporting plan/deliverables)	20
Experience, qualifications and skills of the evaluation team (including examples of similar evaluative work in persuasive storytelling, higher-education, and/or multi-grant programs)	20
Value for money	20
TOTAL	100%

Desired Evaluator Skills, Qualities, and Attributes

The GRP is eager to partner with a team of evaluators who are creative, flexible, and collaborative. An ideal evaluation team will bring:

- Direct experience, and enthusiasm, for working with Gulf communities and academic institutions
- A successful track record of evaluating multi-grant, higher-education programs or similar work
- Strong communication skills and an ability to communicate findings and recommendations in a compelling and strategic way to non-research audiences

- Experience in developing participatory, story-centered evaluations
- Ability to design and execute surveys, interviews, focus groups, and other data collection methods to capture both quantitative and qualitative data
- A strong working knowledge of place-based programming and/or environmental education
- Strong project management skills
- Ability to communicate with a variety of stakeholder audiences
- Demonstrated ability to work with ambiguity and discern major themes from disparate and occasionally sparse data.

Content of Proposals

We recognize that responding to an RFP requires time and resources, and we aim to make this process as efficient and accessible as possible. To that end, we ask that proposals include, at minimum, the elements outlined below. Proposals may be submitted in Word, PowerPoint or PDF format and be limited to 10 pages (excluding work examples).

- **Detailed:** Describe your overall approach to the program evaluation- what design and structure do you suggest?
- **High-level:** Overview of timeline, activities and key phases. How and when will you engage stakeholders?
- **Detailed:** What are the deliverables of your proposed process? How will you communicate findings and recommendations (reporting and sharing)?
- **High-level:** Describe the experience, skills and availability of the personnel most likely to be the lead of the evaluation. Include experience, skills and availability for any additional personnel most likely assigned to the evaluation.
- **Attachments:** Append 1-3 examples of similar program evaluations (i.e., multi-grant programs, higher education programs, process, outcome and future direction evaluations) completed, where possible.
- **Detailed:** Submit a detailed, itemized budget for the total period of services. The budget should not exceed \$400,000.

RFP milestones and dates

Milestone	Target Date
RFP Release	16 May 2025
Information session	30 May 2025
Proposals due	13 June 2025
Notification of decision	30 June 2025
Estimated date for execution of contract	23 July 2025
Annual GFDS Program Directors' meeting in Irvine, CA. This is an opportunity to co-design the evaluation and meet key stakeholders.	Either 5, 6, 7 or 8 August 2025

The GRP will host an information session on 30 May at 1.00pm EST via MS Teams. Please register and submit any questions ahead of the information session by 29 May via email to

Siyengar@nas.edu

Submission instructions

Submit proposals in Word, PDF, or PowerPoint format to Sweatha Iyengar at Siyengar@nas.edu by Friday, June 13, 2025, by 5.00pm EST.

Contact

Please direct any correspondence and questions regarding this RFP to Sweatha Iyengar, Senior Program Officer of Grants, Evaluation and Management, at Siyengar@nas.edu

Final note

Please note that we are proactively soliciting proposals from organizations specializing in evaluation that are familiar with the Gulf region. We will be keeping all the proposals on file so that our colleagues in the GRP working on future projects can see an example of a proposal from your organization along with the RFP as they are planning and soliciting their own evaluations. If you are not able to take on this evaluation but would still like to submit a proposal to be kept on file let us know. We understand there are competing priorities, and this may not be the right time for your organization.

ADDITIONAL PROGRAM INFORMATION

Program Inputs, Outputs and Outcomes

The GFDS program intended inputs, outputs and outcomes are summarized in Appendix B.

ABOUT THE GULF RESEARCH PROGRAM

The National Academies' Gulf Research Program (GRP) is an independent, science-based program founded in 2013 as part of legal settlements with the companies involved in the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster. The GRP's mission is to develop, translate, and apply science to enhance the safety of offshore energy, the environment, and the wellbeing of the people of the Gulf region for generations to come. It supports innovative science, guides data design and monitoring, and builds and sustains networks to generate long-term benefits for the Gulf region and the nation.

Appendix A

Examples of visually engaging evaluation reports

- <https://www.energy.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/2022-12-EvaluationReportSydneyWaterWaterFix.pdf>
- <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/10546/621686/1/er-together-against-poverty-phase-ii-learning-review-100325-en.pdf>
- https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000113188/download/?_ga=2.72097557.761146539.1685938859-1514726981.1685938859
- <https://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/farm/reports/reports/2017/rwjf439426>
- https://www.abtglobal.com/sites/default/files/2024-09/MEL_SUP_10.17.18_SCREEN.pdf
- <https://www.energy.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-01/NSW-2024-Evaluation-Report-Executive-Summary-Greening-our-City.pdf>
- <https://dcj.nsw.gov.au/documents/children-and-families/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/programs-grants-and-funding/resources/KPMG-Evaluation-of-the-NSW-Domestic-and-Family-Violence-Blueprint-for-Reform-2016-21.pdf>

Appendix B

Program inputs

The program inputs may include, but are not limited to:

- \$8.5 million in funding distributed across 8 institutions over Phases 1 (pilot) and 2
- At least one studio course is offered per year at each participating institution
- Sustainability planning to continue the program post-GRP funding
- Faculty and staff involvement across disciplines and colleges
- One program director (faculty lead) at each participating institution
- Participation of associated and guest faculty (e.g., co-program directors, lecturers, staff coordinators, and admin)
- Development and implementation of interdisciplinary, place-based curricula
- Integration of design thinking as a research and teaching tool to support innovation and problem-solving
- Identification and interaction with relevant local and regional community partners (including nonprofits, government, and business sectors).

Program outputs

The program outputs may include, but are not limited to:

- Number of studio courses throughout the program (each school is required to include at least one studio course per year)
- Number of students trained through the program (undergraduate and graduate) and their degrees
- Number of student visits to sites
- Number of faculty involved in the program within and external to the architectural program
- Number of disciplines, schools, majors involved in the program (faculty and students)
- Number of student projects developed/number of proposed solutions
- Number of innovative, interdisciplinary and place-based course plans/curriculum developed specifically for this plan (must include design thinking as a research tool)
- Number of communities researched through the program
- Number of community partners involved with the program
- Number of interactions or collaborations between grantees and their teams
- Written products including studio books (summary of students' projects), academic articles from faculty about pedagogical approaches, conference presentations, and curriculum materials.

Desired outcomes of the program

The overarching desired outcome of the GFDS is a better prepared next generation of design, architecture, and urban development-related students with the capacity to identify, visualize, explore, and propose design thinking and interdisciplinary solutions to address critical issues in the Gulf region.

The desired outcomes of the program may include:

1. ***Students and institutions demonstrate increased knowledge, skills and capacity to apply interdisciplinary, design-driven approaches to addressing Gulf Coast challenges.***

At the conclusion of the project, students and faculty engaged in GFDS will demonstrate enhanced interdisciplinary knowledge, applied learning, and collaborative problem-solving skills, as well as a deeper understanding of Gulf Coast challenges, equipping them to develop and implement innovative, real-world solutions within their professional fields.

- **Potential indicators:** Increase in interdisciplinary knowledge related to Gulf Coast challenges; demonstrated problem-solving and collaboration in team-based projects; ability to integrate design, science, and engineering in project work; application of design-driven thinking in real-world or simulated contexts; increased faculty competence and confidence in teaching interdisciplinary content; collaboration across departments or disciplines; institutionalization of curriculum; sustained support for interdisciplinary studio; intra-institutional and cross-institutional collaborations; continued participation in GFDS network beyond funding period; external funding; and alignment of GFDS activities and learning outcomes with the GF and GRP missions.
- **Potential methods:** Pre-post student surveys assessing knowledge and confidence in interdisciplinary design; evaluation of student projects and studio written materials; student reflections; student focus groups or interviews; faculty surveys or interviews; course documentation reviews; faculty peer reviews; case studies; and institutional leadership interviews.

2. ***Established and sustained GFDS curriculum and program participation.*** GFDS is established and sustained at institutions with accredited architecture schools across the five Gulf Coast states, with demonstrated institutional capacity to develop, implement, and maintain interdisciplinary design curricula aligned with program goals. Faculty show increased engagement in interdisciplinary teaching and collaboration, and students demonstrate growing interest in enrolling in GFDS courses. The program is recognized across participating institutions as a valuable model for integrating design thinking with local regional and disciplinary challenges, contributing to the long-term sustainability of interdisciplinary teaching and learning practices.

- **Potential indicators:** Number and continuity of GFDS courses offered over time; institutional support (e.g., funding, leadership support and backing, integration into

other course curriculum or program); number of faculty whose academic careers were positively influenced through participation in GFDS (e.g., tenure-track faculty supported by the grant who achieved tenure, received promotions, or secured leadership roles); creation of policies or structures to sustain interdisciplinary design education (e.g., cross-listed courses); interfaculty collaboration; faculty perceptions of GFDS' value and visibility in the institution; trends in enrollment numbers; student feedback on course relevance and appeal; mention of GFDS in institutional documents and online presence; expansion of GFDS into other departments.

- **Potential methods:** Faculty interviews on long-term planning; institutional document review (e.g., course outlines, memos of support, funding records); faculty surveys; internal communications or recognition of GFDS in meetings, newsletters or events; enrollment data over multiple terms; student surveys or exit reflections; student interviews and focus groups about how they heard about the course and why they enrolled; content analysis of institutional publications and websites; interviews with department heads or deans.
3. **Program long-term legacy and alignment with the GRP mission.** GFDS is fully integrated into participating institutions' academic programs, with continued interdisciplinary teaching, student engagement, and regional partnerships sustained beyond the GRP funding. The program leaves a lasting legacy aligned with the GRP's mission by advancing resilience, innovation, and sustainability through institutionalized curriculum, faculty leadership, and ongoing community-connected design initiatives.
- **Potential indicators:** GFDS continues beyond GRP funding; GFDS becomes a part of standard offerings; ongoing faculty leadership and institutional investment in GFDS; student participation remains strong and grows over time; faculty continue to teach course; program outcomes continue to reflect the GRP's focus areas; GFDS cited in institutional or external reports, proposals, conferences; replication or adaptation of model by other departments or institutions; number of graduates continuing in professional careers aligned with the program.
 - **Potential methods:** Interviews with faculty staff and leadership; documentation review of internal funding, staff and structural support; faculty or alumni surveys and interviews; longitudinal tracking of course enrollment; content analysis of student projects; stakeholder reflections on program; network analysis of collaborations.
4. **Gulf design network.** GFDS cultivates a visible and interconnected Gulf Design Network composed of students, alumni, faculty, staff, and institutional leaders who are committed to addressing critical Gulf Coast challenges. This network extends across sectors- government, industry, non-profits, and communities- and is characterized by active

collaboration, mentorship, and knowledge-sharing around energy, environment, and community resilience.

- **Potential indicators:** Number and types of individuals in the network; the strength and frequency of connections; network growth and density over time; networks' participation in GFDS-related courses; how individuals perceive their connection to the network; the value placed on the network for learning; shared identity or purpose around regional commitment and design-based solutions; evidence of ongoing engagement of alumni with GFDS institutions; initiatives led by network beyond scope of GFDS.
 - **Potential methods:** Social network mapping; network surveys or interviews asking participants to identify others in the network; participation at relevant events; survey assessing perceived benefits, shared goals of network; case studies.
5. **Community component.** Participating institutions establish and deepen sustained, reciprocal relationships with local and regional community partners, including the Gulf Scholars Program (GSP), businesses, non-profits, and government entities, that support student learning, inform curriculum, and advance solutions to Gulf Coast challenges. These partnerships foster meaningful community involvement in design studio projects, ensuring that student work is relevant, place-based, and responsive to real-world needs. Over time, institutions demonstrate increased capacity to engage communities as collaborators in interdisciplinary research, design, and implementation, contributing to shared goals around resilience, equity, and sustainability in the region.
- **Potential indicators:** Number of projects that have sought and obtained community input and feedback in different phases of the studios, from project selection, background research, site analysis, mid and final project reviews; Number of active community partners per institution; diversity of sectors represented; new partnerships formed during the GFDS; frequency and nature of community involvement; extent to which community feedback or input is integrated into curriculum or student projects; communities' perceptions of the partnerships with institutions and perceive value and relevance; perceived usefulness of student learning and work by community partners; community use of student designs or projects in real-world applications; student's ability to apply feedback from community stakeholders in design iterations; students, and faculty oral or poster presentations.
 - **Potential methods:** Meeting logs; faculty interviews and focus groups; case studies; community partners interviews or focus groups; student reflections; conference attendance records or materials.

Appendix C

Data handover

- GFDS proposals/RFAs
- Year 1 Progress Report – June 2025
- Year 2 Progress Report – June 2026
- Final Narrative Report – September 2027
- Faculty surveys developed pre-evaluation
- GRP Concept documents used for program development
- GRP internal documents (strategic plan, mission, vision, etc.)
- Written products produced by grantees (studio reports)
- Pilot progress reports (Semester 1 – Semester 2 (2023) and final report (2024)
- Pilot Updated Workplans (2023)
- Proposal Review documents, including reviews from independent reviewers of proposals (2022 & 2024)
- GRP-produced reports and presentations related to the GFDS.