

Summary: Strategic Promotion of Academic Research and Knowledge (SPARK)

Faculty of Community Services (FCS) – Toronto Metropolitan University

The Strategic Promotion of Academic Research and Knowledge (SPARK) program is a five-part initiative designed to enhance research capacity, foster high-impact external funding, support early- and mid-career scholarship, and sustain research productivity during leadership service across the Faculty of Community Services (FCS). SPARK advances the Faculty's commitment to research, scholarly, and creative (SRC) excellence at all career stages.

Program Overview

1. Course Release Incentive Program for Established Researchers

Supports high-performing tenured faculty who serve as Principal Investigators on at least two concurrent external awards totaling \$200,000+ in new funding. Recipients receive a Dean's Office-funded course release to expand research, mentoring, and knowledge mobilization activities. Applications are reviewed twice yearly based on research complexity, engagement, and alignment with FCS priorities.

2. Course Release for Major Grant Submissions

Faculty submitting new external grant applications requesting \$500,000 or more in total funding automatically qualify for up to two course releases (one per year during the first two years of the award) to support major project initiation and management.

3. Internal Grants Competition

Continue to fund pre-tenure faculty through Seed, Travel, and Publication Grants, with two annual intakes in the fall and winter.

4. External Grant Preparation Support Fund (Milestone-Based Model)

Provides up to \$3,000 in support for tenured faculty who have not held an external research grant as a Principal Investigator within the last five (5) years. Funding is tied to pre-approved milestones such as literature reviews, data preparation, or CV updates, reinforcing accountability and research readiness.

5. Dean's Leadership Funding for School Directors

Ensures research continuity for faculty serving in leadership roles. The Dean may allocate dedicated SRC funding to sustain ongoing scholarly and research activities during administrative appointments.

Strategic Impact

SPARK represents an investment in FCS research excellence. By supporting established and emerging scholars, incentivizing major grant success, and maintaining research momentum through leadership transitions, SPARK strengthens the Faculty's overall research culture and global impact. It is intended to position FCS as a leader in advancing community-engaged, socially responsive research that contributes to social, economic, and environmental progress in Canada and beyond.

Pilot Program Details: SPARK

Part 1: Course Release Incentive Program for Established Researchers

This program provides limited course releases to faculty members who are **Principal Investigator (PI) on at least two concurrent active external awards** and who demonstrate a **minimum of \$200,000 in secured funding** (cumulative) for **their awarded projects**.

Eligibility Criteria:

- Open to **tenured faculty** in the Faculty of Community Services
- Must hold **at least two concurrent active external research awards** as PI
- Have a confirmed research portfolio totaling a minimum of **\$200,000 in new funding projected** over the upcoming fiscal year(s) as demonstrated in a Formal notice or letter of award. This total is exclusive of TMU/FCS funding (cash and in-kind) and all sources of in-kind, and also excludes select training programs such as Mitacs
- Research funding must be confirmed **going forward** over upcoming fiscal year(s) as the program is not retroactive **and does not consider** previously received allocations (e.g. the carry forward of residual funds received in a previous fiscal year cannot be included). The fiscal year is aligned with TMU's fiscal year: April 1 – March 31.
- Faculty must **not hold any other course release(s)** (SRC-related course release, sabbatical, School or Program Director release, etc.) where the award would put them below the requirement to teach a minimum of one course in each of the two teaching terms. [TMU Course Release Policy & Practice](#)
- Faculty must be actively involved in research leadership, knowledge mobilization, and student mentorship activities
- The cost of the course release will be covered by the **Dean's Office**, in coordination with the faculty member's School
- Faculty members who have received a SPARK Course Release Incentive must wait at least **one full year** after the completion of the awarded release before reapplying

Application Details:

There are **two intakes annually**:

1. **Fall Intake** – Application deadline: November 1
2. **Winter Intake** – Application deadline: March 1

For planning purposes and to provide suitable notice to School Directors, during the **Fall Intake**, applicants can request a course release for the immediately upcoming Spring (2026), Fall (2026) and Winter (2027) semesters, and during the **Winter Intake**, applicants can apply for the Fall (2026), Winter (2027) and Spring (2027) semesters.

Application Requirements

Applicants must submit the following:

A completed and signed [SPARK – Course Release Application Form](#) that includes:

- A summary of current research projects (title, funder, duration, and amount).
- A 1-paragraph statement outlining current and planned research activities, mentorship, and knowledge mobilization.
- Endorsement from the School Director confirming eligibility and the ability of the School to accommodate the proposed course release.

Review Process

Applications will be reviewed by a Faculty-level committee composed of the Associate Dean, SRC and one Faculty member from the FCS SRC Committee.

Prioritization and award of the releases will be based upon:

- Total value and complexity of the concurrent /active external awards
- Supervision, research training and mentoring of HQP
- Community engagement and knowledge mobilization

Completed applications are to be submitted to **Iain McQueen** Director, Strategic SRC, Partnerships and Special Projects imcqueen@torontomu.ca to confirm eligibility.

Part 2: Course Release for Major Grant Submissions

Faculty members submitting a new external research grant application with a **total funding request exceeding \$500,000** will be automatically considered for course release in each of the first **two years of the award** to assist with the launching of the major initiative.

Eligibility Criteria:

- The new grant application must request **\$500,000 or more** in total external sponsor funding
- The total (**\$500,000 or more**) is exclusive of TMU/FCS funding (cash and in-kind) and all sources of in-kind
- Faculty members must be the **Principal Investigator (PI)** on the submission
- This course release can be leveraged and included on the application submission
- Subject to the external application being awarded, each applicant will receive a maximum of **two course releases per award**, and a maximum of **one** must be taken in each of the first two years of the award. There is no carry-forward, banking, or deferral of the release(s) to subsequent years
- Provided they meet the eligibility criteria, applicants may then apply to the Course Release Incentive Program (Part 1) for subsequent years of support.
- Researchers who subsequently receive **any other type of release (SRC, sabbatical, school/program director, etc.)** that would put them below a minimum 1+1 teaching threshold would have this release rescinded (subject to confirm at the time of award).

Program Details:

- No new application is required; eligibility is considered upon submission of a qualifying grant to an external sponsor
- Please contact Iain McQueen Director, Strategic SRC, Partnerships and Special Projects imcqueen@torontomu.ca prior to submitting the Grant Authorization Form (GAF) to discuss/confirm eligibility
- Course release(s) must be taken in the first two years as indicated in the formal Notice of Award
- Confirmation of course release(s) is required from the Office of the Associate Dean, SRC, and School Director (this will be captured and recorded as approved on the submitted Grant Authorization Form – GAF).

Part 3: Internal Grants Competition (Revised)

The **FCS Internal Grants Competition** continues to support **pre-tenure faculty** through Seed, Travel, and Publication grants. Effective Winter 2026, FCS is discontinuing the **New Collaborative Research Grant**, as tenured faculty now have access to additional strategic opportunities (e.g., Course Release Incentive/Course Release for Major Grant Submissions Program and the External Grant Preparation Support Fund).

Internal Grant opportunities for Pre-Tenured Faculty:

Each competition intake (Spring and Fall) will fund the following:

- **3 Travel Grants** – Up to **\$1,500** each
- **3 Seed Grants** – Up to **\$6,000** each
- **3 Publication Grants** – Up to **\$1,500** each

Program Details:

- Two submission rounds per year: **Spring and Fall**
- The Fall competition opens on September 17 at 3 p.m. and closes on October 31
- The Spring Competition opens on March 18 and closes on April 18
- Maximum FCS contribution per round is \$27,000
- All other aspects of the Internal Grants Competition remain unchanged

For full information, policies and application forms, please visit:

<https://www.torontomu.ca/fcs/research/resources-for-faculty/internal-research-grants/>

PART 4: External Grant Preparation Support Fund

Program Overview

The **External Grant Preparation Support Fund** is designed to assist faculty members in preparing competitive external research funding applications. This program provides targeted financial support for activities that directly contribute to the **development and submission of an external grant proposal**. Support is provided through a **stepped reimbursement model**, allowing researchers to be pre-approved for eligible activities with funds released incrementally as they complete key milestones in the grant development process.

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible for this fund, applicants must:

- Be **tenured faculty members** within the Faculty of Community Services (FCS).
- **Not have held an external research grant** as a Principal Investigator (PI) within the past **five (5) years**.
- Be pursuing **one specific external research funding opportunity** (one targeted initiative per applicant).
- Submit a **plan** outlining their pathway to an external grant submission within **12 months** of receiving internal support.
- Target a recognized **external funding agency**, such as the Tri-Agencies (SSHRC, NSERC, CIHR), provincial, international, or foundation-based funders.
- Note: While there is **no limit** to the number of faculty who may participate in the program at a given time, individuals are allowed to receive these program support funds only once.
- There is no set intake date for the Initial Consultation or application; however researchers should consider the timeline associated with their external grant target deadline

Funding Structure

- **Maximum Award:** Up to **\$3,000 per applicant**.
- **Funding Model:** Stepped **milestone-based reimbursement**.
- **Duration:** All approved activities must occur within **12 months** of award confirmation.

Milestone-Based Reimbursement

Applicants will propose and agree upon a set of milestones (e.g., completion of literature review, data collection plan, draft proposal submission, budget development).

Eligible Expenses

Reimbursable costs must directly support the preparation and submission of an external research proposal. Examples include:

- **Literature Review:** Costs related to conducting or supporting an in-depth literature review (e.g., research assistant hours, access to specialized databases).
- **Curriculum Vitae (CV) Updates:** Support for updating or customizing an academic CV or Common CV (CCV) to meet funder requirements.
- **Data Analysis & Preparation:** Reimbursement for activities such as data cleaning, preliminary analyses, visualization creation, or preparation of supporting figures and tables.

Ineligible Expenses

The following expenses are examples of items that are **not eligible** for reimbursement under this program:

- **Capital or equipment purchases**, including computers, tablets, lab equipment, or furniture.
- **External professional services**, such as paid grant writers, consultants, or contract research organizations.
- **Software or hardware purchases.**
- **Conference travel, hospitality, or dissemination activities** unrelated to proposal development.
- **Costs already covered** by another internal or external source of funding.

Application Process

1. Initial Consultation:

Contact the SRC Support team (Iain and Linn) to discuss your project and determine the activities that will be eligible for funding. A clear list of milestones will be agreed upon, outlining the specific steps involved in your grant preparation.

2. Submit an Application:

Complete a Grant Preparation Support Fund request to the Associate Dean SRC, providing a brief description of the external grant you are preparing for and outlining the specific activities you require funding for. Attach any supporting documents such as timelines, a detailed budget, or project goals as necessary.

3. Approval & Milestone Agreement:

Once your application is reviewed, you will receive notification of approval. At this stage, an agreement will be established with respect to the release of funds aligned with the approved activities.

4. Milestone Completion & Reimbursement:

As you complete each milestone, submit a Milestone Completion checklist to the SRC Dean detailing the work completed and a request for release of funding for the next milestone.

Part 5: Dean's Leadership Funding for School Directors

Overview:

To sustain and support the research trajectories of **School Directors** during their leadership roles, the Dean may provide **dedicated SRC funding** upon appointment.

Program Details:

- Funding is allocated **at the discretion of the Dean**
- Available to faculty members **upon assuming a School Director role**
- Intended to maintain **continuity of research and scholarly engagement** during administrative service
- Support level and duration will be determined case-by-case based on research program needs and leadership workload

SPARK is a strategic investment in the scholarly growth of FCS faculty at all stages of their careers. By supporting high-performing researchers, fostering major grant activity, enabling early-career scholarship, and maintaining research momentum during leadership, SPARK strengthens the Faculty's overall research culture and external impact.