



**ASCEND<sup>R</sup>**  
Research

# **Advancing STEM Careers through Education, Networking, Development + Research Research Seed Grant Program Information Session**



December 9, 2025



# Leadership



Dr. Azuri Gonzalez  
Executive Director  
HSRU Alliance



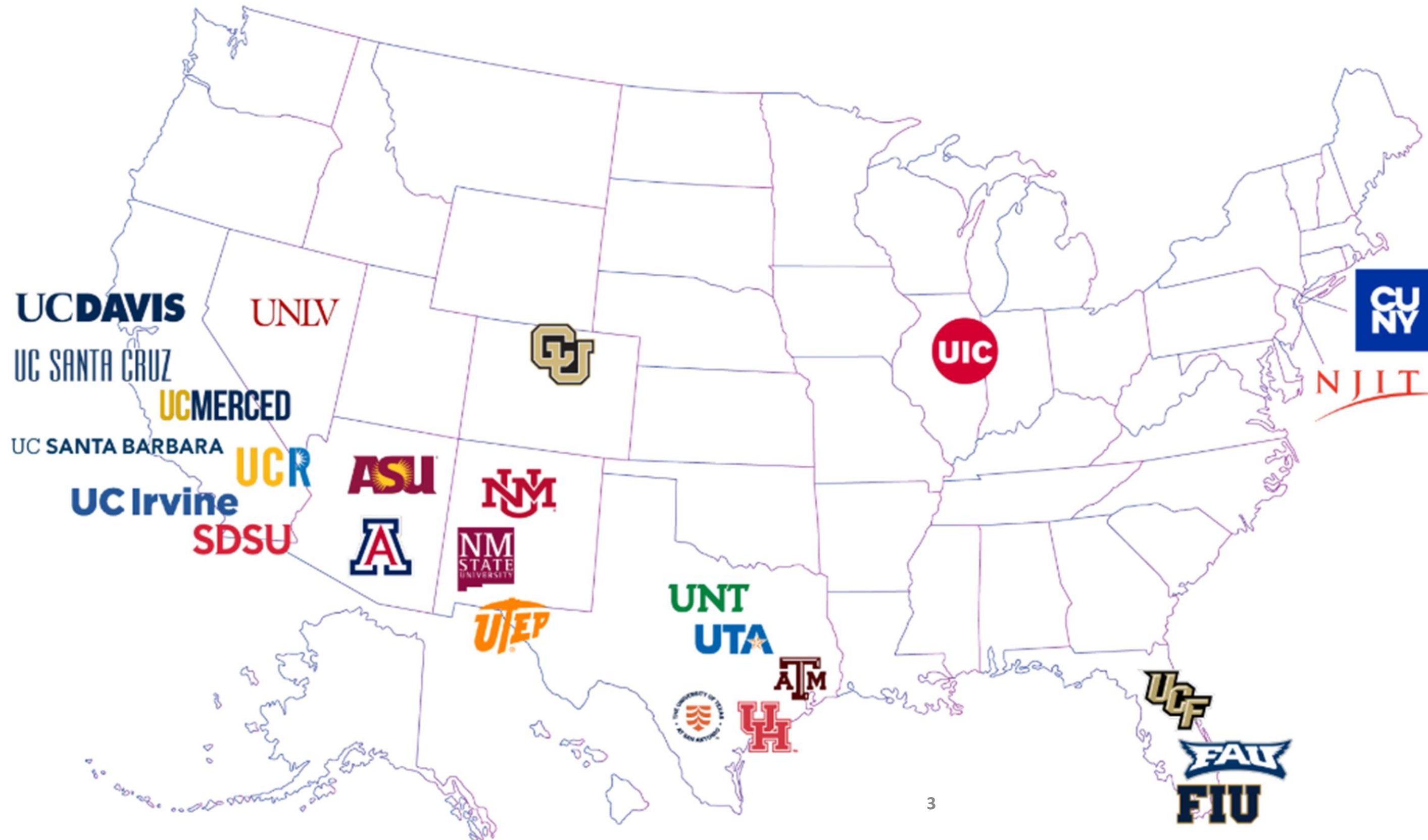
Dr. Grace Bochenek Professor,  
School of Modeling Simulation &  
Training, UCF



Dr. Shery Welsh  
Executive Director  
UTEP Aerospace Center

# HSRU Consortium for DOD Research and STEM Graduate Pathways

25 Research-intensive Institutions  
Across 10 States



# Purpose of the Information Session

- Introduce the 2026 ASCEND<sup>R</sup> Research Grant opportunity
- Highlight alignment with DoD priorities and ASCEND<sup>R</sup> goals
- Clarify eligibility, proposal requirements, and timelines
- Provide an overview of review criteria and expectations
- Address questions from prospective applicants

# About ASCEND<sup>R</sup>

- DoD-supported initiative of the HSRU Alliance
- Expands national defense–aligned research capacity across HSRU R1 institutions
- Two Integrated components
  - ➔ ASCEND<sup>R</sup> Research Program (competitive seed grants)
  - ➔ ASCEND<sup>R</sup> Leadership Program (faculty cohort and operational immersion)



# Program Overview

*Advancing research impact through defense-aligned innovation and mentorship.*

- **Administrator:** HSRU Alliance
- **Funding Source:** Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD)
- **Cycle:** August 2026 – August 2027 (one-year projects)
- **Anticipated Number of Awards:** 10
- **Award Size:** Up to \$200,000 per award
- **Total Funding:** \$2,000,000

# Key Dates

- Request for Proposal Notice & Q&A portal opened: **November 11, 2025**
- Q&A portal closes: **December 19, 2025**
- Sponsor (university) full proposal due: **February 27, 2026 – 11:59 PM EST**
- Anticipated Award Date: **May 2026**
- Anticipated Start Date: **August 16, 2026**
- Expected Project End: **August 2027**

# Program Goals

- Leverage HSRU Alliance research strengths in priority DoD technical areas.
- Expose faculty and students to real-world defense and national security challenges.
- Integrate graduate student researchers as core contributors to projects.
- Deploy and enhance mentoring, professional development, and research environments that support student progression.
- Deliver research outcomes that address specific DoD technical challenges and gaps.



# Research Priority Areas

Aligned with DoD Critical Technology Areas:

- **Advanced Materials**

- Higher strength, lighter weight, higher efficiency materials
- Performance in extreme environments to better protect service members

- **Human–Machine Interfaces**

- Human–machine teaming; augmented and virtual reality
- Immersive training environments; intuitive interfaces for mission planning and command

- **Space Technology**

- Space flight, space communications, power, autonomy, and on-orbit processing
- Technologies for resilient, proliferated architectures and cross-domain operations

# Eligibility Requirements

- Proposal must originate from an **HSRU member institution in good standing**.
- PI and Co-PIs must be **research faculty or tenure/tenure-track faculty**, early to mid-career (within the first 8 years of their professional career).
- The PI **must hire and integrate at least one Graduate Research Assistant (GRA)** who is enrolled at project start and maintains enrollment eligibility throughout the project.
- All PIs, Co-PIs, and GRAs must be **U.S. Persons** (U.S.-born or naturalized U.S. citizens).
- **Up to 2 Co-PIs** in addition to the PI.
- Limit on number of **proposals per university: 2** (as defined by each institution's internal process).

# Required Documents

- **NSF Biographical Sketch** (PI and Co-PIs; current NSF format)
- **Proposal Narrative** – max 4 pages
  - Background Statement
  - Statement of Objectives
  - Plan of Work (including risks, timeline, milestones, and graduate mentorship plan)
- **References** – max 1 page
- **Budget Detail** – 1 page (NSF budget template format)
- **Budget Justification** – 1 page
- **Mentorship Plan** – 1 page
- **Leadership Interest & Commitment** – 1 page (letter or statement of commitment to the leadership program)

# Project Description Expectations (Proposal Narrative)

Be understandable to experienced researchers (not necessarily field specialists).

- **Background Statement:**

- Prior work in the field (how it is done today)
- Challenges/limitations in current approaches
- How the proposed research addresses these challenges

- **Statement of Objectives:**

- Clear statement of what you are trying to do
- Significance and potential impact relative to prior work

- **Plan of Work:**

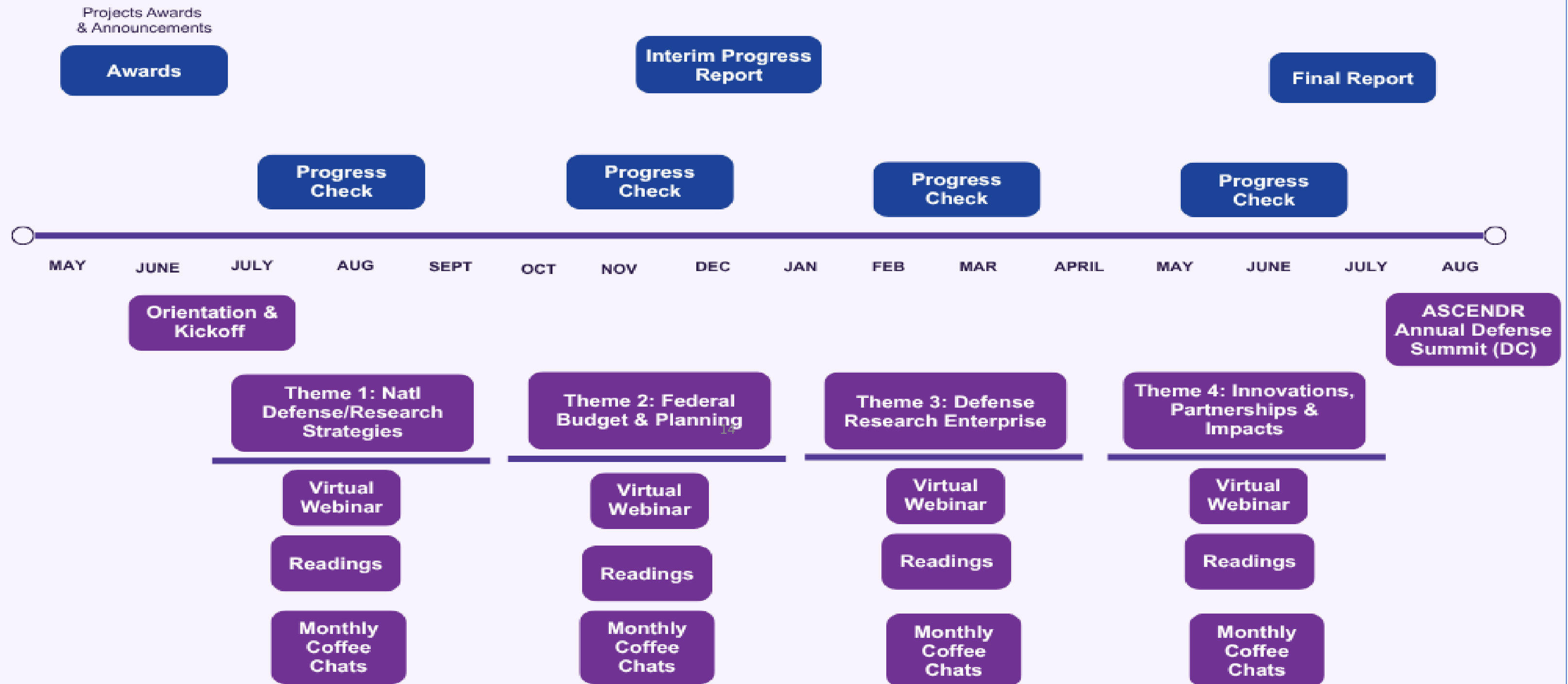
- Procedures, activities, risks, and timeline
- Milestones and deliverables
- Graduate student mentorship and role in the project
- PI and Co-PI qualifications and collaboration plan



# ASCEND<sup>R</sup> Leadership Program

- PI and Co-PIs must **jointly participate** in the ASCEND<sup>R</sup> Leadership Program.
- Program elements may include:
  - Engagements with top-level DoD officials and senior military commanders
  - Visits to operational units, research laboratories, and defense facilities
  - Defense-focused roundtables, panels, and innovation discussions
- Purpose:
  - Create a cohort of **defense-informed HSRU faculty**
  - Strengthen capacity to mentor graduate students and peers in DoD-related research
  - Foster long-term research partnerships with defense organizations

# RESEARCH PROGRAM



# LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

# Allowable Use of Funds

- All requested funds must be **integral to the research** and not available from department, college, or center resources.
- Allowable examples:
  - PI/Co-PI salary as a percentage of effort (up to **two summer months equivalent**)
  - Graduate Research Assistant support (salary, tuition, travel, other financial support)
  - Student professional development and mentoring activities
  - Consumables, materials, data, and computing resources essential to the research
  - Travel to conferences, workshops, or meetings aligned with the research
  - Publication and dissemination costs
- Cost share is **allowed but not required**.
- Subrecipients **cannot acquire real property or equipment** under the subaward.

# Graduate Research Assistant Integration

- GRA participation is **required**.
- Support can include:
  - Salary, tuition remission, travel, or other financial support
- Proposals should clearly describe:
  - The GRA's role in research tasks and deliverables
  - How the project strengthens the GRA's academic and professional progression
  - Mentoring structure (frequency, format, expectations)
- Mentorship Plan should reflect best practices (e.g., Council of Graduate Schools mentoring resources).



# Evaluation Criteria

Proposals will be reviewed and scored on:

- 1. Alignment with DoD Priorities & ASCEND<sup>R</sup> Goals**  
Clear connection to selected technical area(s)
- 2. Technical Merit & Innovation**  
Novelty, rigor, approach, risk assessment, and feasibility
- 3. Graduate Mentorship & Student Development**  
Quality of mentorship plan and student integration
- 4. Feasibility & Budget Appropriateness**  
Realistic goals for a one-year project; budget aligns with requirements
- 5. Leadership Program Commitment**  
Demonstrated interest and potential contribution to the ASCEND<sup>R</sup> cohort

*Incomplete applications will not be reviewed.*

# Award Management & Deliverables

Funded projects must:

- Submit **bi-annual interim progress reports** (instructions to follow at award).
- Submit a **final report** within **30 days** after the end of the award period.
- Submit requests for **budget modifications or no-cost extensions**
  - At least **90 days before** the award end date.

**Note:** Failure to comply with deliverables may affect eligibility for future seed funding opportunities.

# Additional Information

- For Program information and updates visit the HSRU ASCEND<sup>R</sup> Research page: [www.hsru.org/initiatives/ascendr/research](http://www.hsru.org/initiatives/ascendr/research)
- Work with your:
  - Office of Research / Sponsored Programs
  - HSRU site lead or research development support staff

# Questions

- Please submit any additional questions please through the online form at:  
[https://forms.office.com/pages/responsepage.aspx?id=0iF8hRYapEOQz9V\\_P6udL2OgnRAjAT9Bnv4K68s5kQhUREJZMjFMNjMyRU1YRzNQRkFHWUtGREVMUC4u&route=shorturl](https://forms.office.com/pages/responsepage.aspx?id=0iF8hRYapEOQz9V_P6udL2OgnRAjAT9Bnv4K68s5kQhUREJZMjFMNjMyRU1YRzNQRkFHWUtGREVMUC4u&route=shorturl)
- This form will be available until December 19th 2025.