

The 21st Century Federalist Papers Project

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Project Budget:

\$25,000

Abstract:

James Madison, the Father of the Constitution, was a political innovator. The 21st Century Federalist Papers Project will continue this tradition of innovation by recruiting the sharpest minds in the country to produce social science-informed recommendations to improve American democratic institutions. These distinguished experts will produce nonpartisan, technical, evidence-based political reform briefs to be shared with national policymakers and the public at large. But those are boring to read! Working with each nationally recognized expert and collaborating good government advocacy organization, JMU APRILab students will produce public-facing digital “explainer” campaigns—the modern equivalent of Madison’s 18th Century *Federalist Papers*. These public advocacy campaigns may include animated films, data visualizations, and social media to raise public awareness of innovative nonpartisan solutions to significant, real-world democratic problems.

Project:

The American Political Reform and Innovation Lab (APRILab) is a nonpartisan, research impact-oriented, undergraduate research experience lab that produces original, evidence-based recommendations on institutional political reform. APRILab will recruit distinguished scholars of democracy and nonpartisan political reform organizations to collaboratively produce public-facing “white paper” research reports for policymakers and democracy reformers to use to advocate political innovation in the United States.

The call for proposals will solicit expert teams around selected general political innovation themes, such as:

1. money in politics,
2. gerrymandering
3. Congressional capacity and legislative effectiveness,
4. Presidential accountability and ethics enforcement, and
5. Supreme Court transparency and depoliticization.

Rather than being partisan or ideologically motivated, these political innovation reports will advocate solutions based on sound, nonpartisan, empirically based social scientific research.

The reports will exhaustively summarize cutting-edge research by political scientists, economists, media scholars, constitutional lawyers, and other experts. And each report team will develop a set of actionable recommendations for citizens and policymakers to act on. In the long run, recommendations can be reproduced every two-year election cycle as priorities change to draw candidates' attention not just to political dysfunction, but to constructive solutions.

Technical expert reports are necessary but rarely draw attention from the policymakers who need to learn from them. So, APRILab students will take the lead in strategically developing and implementing public-facing, attention-grabbing "explainer" campaigns. The project will rely on JMU students' enthusiasm and ingenuity – and keen familiarity with modern media – to produce products like memes, short animated films, eye catching data visualizations, interactive dynamic websites, and other media that bring these technical recommendations to life.

Working with the experts preparing the reports, APRILab students will create narratives and accompanying media to be released when reports are published. Students will develop strategic communication plans to draw attention to these political innovations, just as James Madison did when he and fellow Framers published their vision of the Constitution in the *New York Packet* and the *Independent Journal*.

APRILab will pair leading academic experts with national political reform organizations such as OpenSecrets (opensecrets.org), Bipartisan Policy Center (bipartisanpolicy.org), and Partnership for Public Service (ourpublicservice.org). The academic experts will earn a stipend to produce the report and to collaborate with APRILab students. APRILab will seek animation and data visualization partners – including JMU's own student-run public relations firm, Bluestone Communications – to help students translate the technical reports into attention-grabbing media products. Students working in the lab will earn money while also learning valuable marketing, media, and teamwork skills, and will expose themselves to a national network of potential future employers.

James Madison University and APRILab will earn positive publicity and attention for offering constructive solutions to today's political problems that James Madison and his contemporary Founders could never have envisioned. We can choose to continue down a path of partisan demonization, democratic backsliding, and counterproductive polarization, or we can develop student leaders who can be the change. This undergraduate research experience will be an exciting and rewarding way for JMU students to become educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives.

A Madison Trust investment in these reports and explainer campaigns for the first two-year cycle will also generate a proof-of-concept case for APRILab and collaborating political reform organizations to seek external funding to expand the themes in future election cycles. By establishing strong professional bonds and public attention to these recommendations and explainers, external funders will more likely support future projects that earn a reputation for

credibility, collaboration, and trust. And, the work produced by the project will promote James Madison University's reputation as a national research university.

Project Budget Amount: \$25,000

Personnel: \$18,750 (5 undergraduate students @ 300 hours x \$12.50/hour)

Other: \$6,250 Professional Services (Public relations, digital animation & data visualization consulting)

Additional information to explain or expand on budgetary needs:

Support for each undergraduate student working one full academic year is estimated to be \$3,750. APRILab students work 10 hours per week for \$12.50 per hour for roughly 15 weeks per semester, and are eligible to work in both Fall and Spring terms. Funding for a team of five students will total \$18,750 (5 students x \$3,750). APRILab will partner with strategic communication, digital animation, and data visualization consultants to work with undergraduate students, who may not otherwise be expected to have the advanced training, skills, equipment, and materials to produce sophisticated media products. Resources for professional services will only be sought if a team of five students is fully funded for the 2023-2024 academic year.