Capital One Illinois Center for Generative AI Safety, Knowledge Systems, and Cybersecurity (ASKS)
Call for Proposals 2026-2027

Abstracts Due: November 21, 2025
Full Proposals Due: January 26, 2026

1. INTRODUCTION

Generative Artificial Intelligence Models (GAIMs) have emerged as transformative tools, driving advancements across diverse domains. However, their widespread adoption raises critical concerns across various dimensions, including truthfulness, safety, cybersecurity, fairness, robustness, and privacy. These models have demonstrated remarkable performance on knowledge reasoning tasks, owing to their implicit knowledge derived from extensive pretraining data. However, their inherent knowledge bases often suffer from disorganization and illusion, bias towards common entities, and rapid obsolescence. Consequently, GAIMs frequently make up untruthful information, exhibit resistance to updating outdated knowledge, or struggle with generalizing across multiple languages. The Capital One Illinois Center for Generative AI Safety, Knowledge Systems, and Cybersecurity (ASKS) is a collaboration between Capital One and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, aiming to advance GAIMs' up-to-date knowledge, safety, truthfulness, and trustworthiness across multiple dimensions and model types, and paving the way for safer and more responsible integration of GAIMs into critical applications including cybersecurity and situation understanding.

2. CFP 2026-2027 TOPICS

The ASKS Center is calling for proposals for the second funding round, 2026-2027 academic year. In this phase, the center will support 3-5 sponsored projects. Each funded project will support a PhD research assistant and 2 weeks of summer salary for the principal investigators (PIs). Each selected project will then engage with research scientists from Capital One to collaborate and jointly advise PhD students.

Topics of interest would include, but are not limited to, those below. Please feel free to bring your unique viewpoint and expertise to these topics:

Large Language Models (LLMs) and Vision Language Models (VLMs) Safety:
- LLM Reasoning
- LLM Agents
- AI Alignment
- Synthetic Data Generation
- LLM Security (e.g., Jailbreaking, Prompt Injection, Guardrail Models)
- Hallucination Mitigation, LLM/VLM factuality
- Multimodal Knowledge Representation
- Knowledge Localization, Updating, and Editing
- Unlearning (e.g., Debiasing through Unlearning Biases)
- Structure-enhanced RAG (Retrieval Augmented Generation)
- Privacy Preservation

Knowledge Systems:
- LLM-enhanced Information Extraction and Knowledge Graph Construction
- Situation Understanding, Forecasting, and Reporting

AI for CyberSecurity:
- Agentic AI for Novel Attacks and Defenses
- Multi-dimensional Anomaly Detection
- LLM Explanation for Cybersecurity
- Temporal-spatial Aware Foundation Models for Cybersecurity
- Privacy-preserving Data Analytics

3. PROPOSAL GUIDELINES

- Eligibility: Full-time tenure-track, research-track, and teaching faculty members at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign are eligible to submit proposals as PIs.
- Submissions should not reference either Capital One, nor speculate about how the research might be applied to current or future Capital One products, services, business models, or needs. Proposals should focus on science.
- Stage 1 abstract submissions: Interested faculty submit a **1-page maximum overview** (excluding references) of a potential full proposal. The purpose of these abstracts is for Capital One to review and provide feedback on the proposal: would Capital One be interested in collaborating with this researcher? Could the proposal include new use cases for the science? Does the project align with industry goals? Feedback will help guide the faculty member towards submitting a more relevant and impactful proposal. Abstracts are not a prerequisite for submitting proposals. A PDF of the 1-page abstract should be submitted **on or before November 21, 2025, at midnight CDT.**
- An ASKS abstract feedback session before **December 19, 2025.** The Capital One Science review team will give feedback on whether a full proposal is encouraged for each abstract submission. It is hoped that this exchange will serve as a matchmaking exercise, enabling the development of well-focused proposals that are aligned with the interests of the PI and Capital One.
- Stage 2 full proposal submissions are due **January 26, 2026, at midnight CDT**. PIs who did not submit abstracts are still eligible to submit full proposals. The proposal should not exceed three pages, with unlimited references. PIs are encouraged to seek collaborations with research scientists at Capital One to prepare for proposals. Proposals will be evaluated by a collaborative advisory board composed of ASKS Leadership Team (excluding board members who submitted proposals) and Capital One scientists for their technical merits and innovations, topic relevance, potential to advance research in focus areas, and broader impacts.
  - Full Proposal Format: The proposal format is single-spaced, 11-point font or larger, with no less than 0.5-inch page margins. The proposal should include the following content:
    - Full names and email addresses of all PIs involved

- Project description (3 pages max), including the focus area of the proposal (per Call for Proposal process), title, PI(s), an executive summary, technical description of the project, expected deliverables/outcomes, milestones, and what plans exist for open sourcing data or results
- List all university background IP (unlimited)
- References (unlimited)
- Requested budget (1 page max), use format shown in Section 7
- Biographies of the PIs (up to 3 pages per PI in NSF Format)
- Selection criteria: Successful projects will be evaluated based on their technical merits and innovations, topic relevance, potential to advance research in focus areas, and broader impacts.
- Project period of performance: August 15, 2026–August 14, 2027.
- Note that **PIs who submitted a full proposal must be available to help review others' proposals (as long as they don't have conflicts of interest).**

4. IMPORTANT DATES

- November 21, 2025: Abstract Submission Deadline
- December 19, 2025: Abstract Feedback from Capital One scientists
- January 26, 2026: Full Proposal Submission Due
- March 20, 2026: Full Proposal Acceptance Notification
- April 15, 2026: On-Campus ASKS Center Event

5. SUBMISSION AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Abstract submission: Link

Full proposal submission: Link

For questions about the proposal submission process, please contact [asks-management@lists.cs.illinois.edu]. For questions about the ASKS Center, please contact the center director, Prof. Heng Ji [hengji@illinois.edu] or the leadership team: [asks-leadership@lists.cs.illinois.edu].

6. ASKS LEADERSHIP TEAM

- Director: Heng Ji (Illinois)
- Associate Director: Gang Wang (Illinois)
- Center Liaison: Prem Natarajan (Capital One)
- Program Manager: Katie Clark (Capital One)
- Center Alliance Manager: Kelly McKinley (Illinois)
- Advisory board members: Jiawei Han (Illinois), Bo Li (Illinois), Milind Naphade (Capital One), Ling Ren (Illinois), Sambit Sahu (Capital One), Gokhan Tur (Illinois)

7. BUDGET FORMAT

Work with your department/school's business office to complete a budget table in the format shown below. The categories and text in the "basis of estimate" column are provided as examples; please update to reflect actual expenses and project needs.

Per the Collaboration Agreement, no F&A costs are to be assessed on Gift-Funded Research Projects. If, through the review process, the project is deemed to be a Sponsored Research Project, budgets will be renegotiated.

Each project is limited to a **maximum of $75K** as the total budget.

Item	Amount	Basis of Estimate
PI Summer Salary	$XX	2 weeks' summer salary, including fringe benefits
GRA Salary Support	$XX	X-months GRA at Y% effort, including fringe
Other Direct Costs	$XX	List items, e.g., high-speed cluster access, publication fees, software costs, travel
Total	$XX	Estimate of total costs