

Federally Funded Research and Development Centers

A Valuable Partner for Safety, Security, and Prosperity

Federally funded research and development centers (FFRDCs) are established by government agencies when they have specific, long-term needs that in-house staff or traditional contractors can't meet. The most important thing to know about them is this: They're different by design.

FFRDCs work with their government partners—also called sponsors—to assist with systems engineering and integration; research and development; and study and analysis of complex problems. They help the government make data-driven decisions that drive change and advance their missions. FFRDCs are operated by non-profit, private organizations and are required to remain free from any commercial interest. As such, they represent resources available to government to explore options, assess impacts, and advise on actions to accelerate change and address critical challenges.

In accordance with the public-interest purpose behind FFRDCs, the FFRDC community offers a blend of non-partisan advice, deep organizational knowledge, and creative solutions.

Innovation with Impact

The first FFRDCs began with a straightforward idea: Maintain a pool of technical expertise to assist government, but one with an independent stance.

This is as true today as ever. You might be surprised to learn just a few of the ways the alliance between FFRDCs and their partners has delivered impact for the U.S. and the world. For example:

- Can you imagine using your smartphone without GPS today? Scientists and engineers at FFRDCs helped design the original global positioning system for the U.S. military.

- Do you fly on jets? If so, you can thank the FFRDC staff who developed the technology that keeps commercial airliners from colliding in mid-air.
- Were you impressed by the Mars Rover that sends back eye-popping images from the Red Planet? That mission is the work of an FFRDC.

We know the challenges government faces are not small, and the opportunities to help government work for the public are many. From defense, cybersecurity, and healthcare to economic stability, homeland security, and transportation infrastructure (to name a few), agencies need partners to accelerate change. FFRDCs are intended to accelerate that change—by fostering innovative solutions through research and collaboration with the private sector, and by helping the government to stay ahead of the issues.

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And because they structurally have no commercial interests, FFRDCs help the government in ways that would be unsuitable or cost-prohibitive for

The MITRE Corporation is a not-for-profit organization chartered to work in the public interest. We apply our skills in systems engineering, research and development, and information technology to help the government address issues of critical national importance.

commercial companies—from performing basic scientific research to addressing a rapid-turnaround capability for users. This is part of what we mean when we say “different by design.”

A Unique Public–Private Partnership

How does this work? FFRDCs are governed by a specific set of guidelines within the Federal Acquisition Regulation, or FAR. The FAR outlines the special role FFRDCs play. By law, FFRDCs don't compete with or work for industry. They don't manufacture or sell products. Even when FFRDCS (such as those operated by MITRE) develop technologies as part of their research, these innovations enter the marketplace through a technology transfer process that benefits government and industry alike.

FFRDCs partner with their government sponsors for the long term. They have no organizational conflicts of

interest that could compromise objectivity, not even their working relationships with their sponsors. In fact, agencies rely on FFRDCs to “speak truth to power.”

This special relationship also makes it possible for FFRDCs to have unique access to government and contractor data. They serve as trusted advisers during complex situations—for acquisitions, for big data analysis, for resolving disputes among multiple stakeholders. All sides know FFRDCs will keep proprietary information secure—never using it to gain a competitive advantage or to undermine another organization. FFRDCs act as true hubs for collaboration among government, industry, academia, and others.

Taken together, FFRDCs represent a tiny fraction of the federal budget. Yet they deliver a strong return on investment on behalf of the safety, security, and prosperity of our nation.