



University of St.Gallen

St.Gallen Collegium

Performance

The What, How, and Why of Optimization.

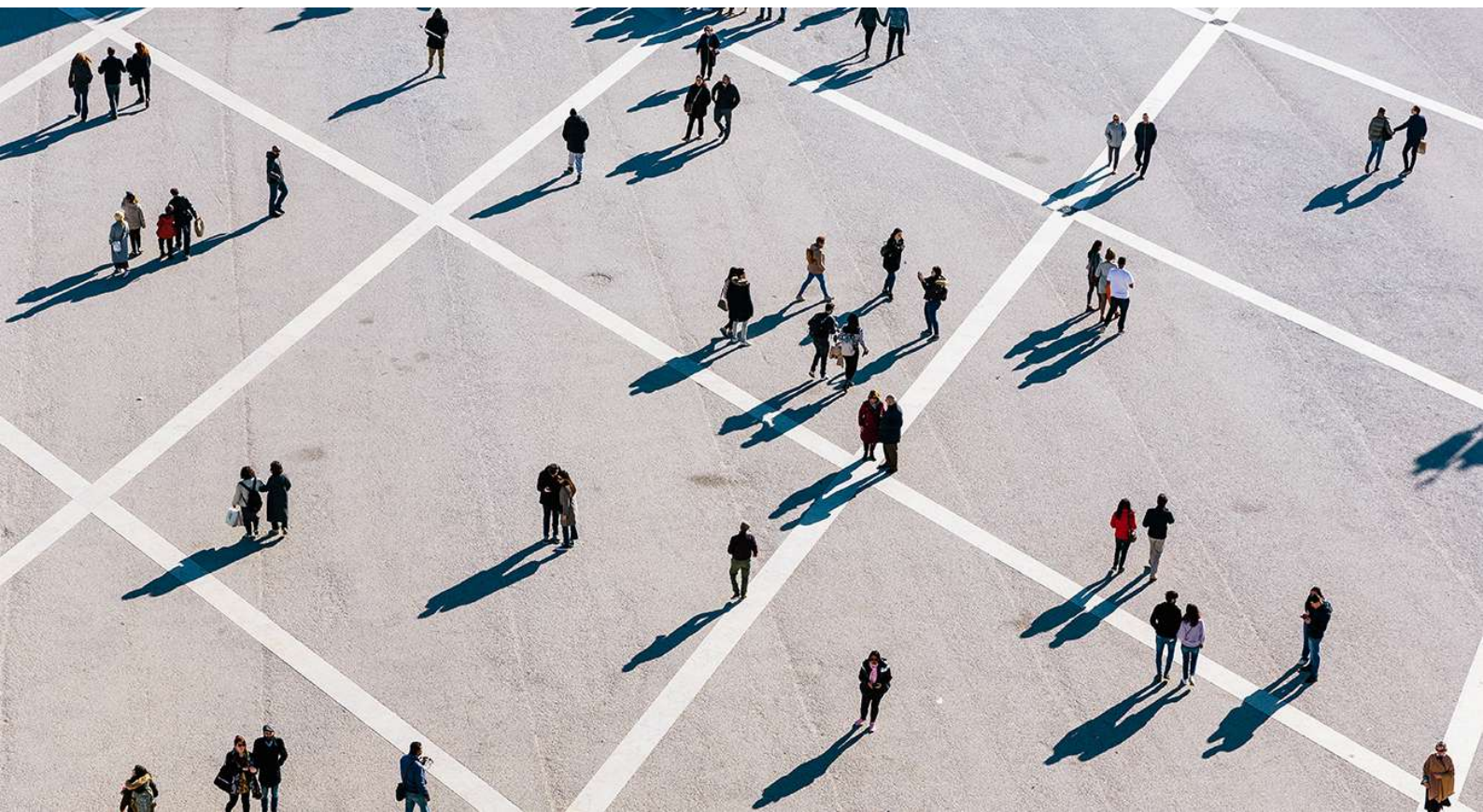
Call for Applications:

St.Gallen Collegium seeks fellows for the academic year 2027-2028.

<http://collegium.unisg.ch>

collegium@unisg.ch

Deadline: **Sunday, October 18, 2026**



Call for Applications

At the University of St.Gallen, Switzerland, researchers from different disciplines and generations convene at St.Gallen Collegium. Fellows pursue their own research and a joint project focusing on a theme related to one of the Grand Challenges of our time. In 2025/2026, the Collegium worked on “Re-Interpreting Freedom”; in 2026/2027 we focus on “Digital Sovereignty.”

For the third Collegium year 2027/2028 (September 1, 2027-May 31, 2028), St.Gallen Collegium will award fellowships to scholars whose work addresses the theme:

Performance

About the Theme

The call for “more performance” has returned with force across European business and politics as a reaction to perceived decreasing productivity of many economies. It simultaneously reflects changing values and preferences of their societies as to what, how, and why shall be optimized.

Companies announce this openly: Nestlé declares it wants to be more performance-driven; UBS insists that performance must again be at the center. Politics has followed suit. The *Schweizerischer Arbeitgeberverband* warns of a spreading culture of *Lifestyle Freizeit*. The German CDU campaigns on *Leistung muss sich wieder lohnen* — performance must pay. Commentators demand “work instead of woke.” The word does considerable heavy lifting. The concept itself is rarely examined.

Performance, as we use it today, has a relatively recent history. The historian Nina Verheyen has argued that measurable, comparable individual performance took its current shape in the nineteenth century, shaped by the rise of mass schooling, industrial labor, and the welfare state. Earlier traditions tied performance more closely to the work itself — to craft, to care, to standards of excellence carried out within a practice and judged by its own internal norms. The shift towards abstracted, quantified output was not inevitable. It was constructed, and it can be interrogated. Much of what gets called individual performance has irreducibly relational features. Contributions emerge between people, in context, supported by predecessors, colleagues, institutions, and inherited knowledge. Measurement systems do not simply reflect performance — they constitute what counts as performance and render other kinds of contribution invisible. The colleague who unblocks others, the institutional memory carried by long-serving staff, the care work that makes everything else possible: these tend to fall outside what is captured and rewarded. The map is not the territory, but in performance cultures, the map increasingly determines whose work counts.

The language of performance also carries significant moral weight. A meritocratic reading treats outcomes as broadly deserved and shortfalls as broadly personal. Harvard moral philosopher Michael Sandel has argued that this framing generates hubris among those who succeed and humiliation among those who do not — with consequences for social solidarity that extend well beyond the individuals concerned. Whether and how strongly this dynamic operates across different institutional and cultural settings is itself a pressing research question, one that has gained new urgency in recent debates on polarization, resentment, and the fraying of social cohesion.

The performance of an economy is also shaped by forces no individual or firm controls. Demographic change is perhaps the most consequential of these. What does prosperity mean if, by 2050, approximately 30% of the Swiss population is over 65, compared to just 9% in 1950? What does it mean for productivity, innovation, and care if Germany's population begins to shrink and declines by an estimated 13% by mid-century? How can societies harness the potential of longer lives rather than treating extended longevity solely as a fiscal burden? These questions demand that we rethink how and what counts as economic performance — and for whom.

The question of who defines what counts as performance, and who benefits from the categories thereby created, is partly political and philosophical, not only technical. St.Gallen Collegium invites researchers from all fields who are interested in a solution-oriented, interdisciplinary discourse on performance. Possible avenues of research include:

- **The history and genealogy of performance:** How did measurable, individual performance become the dominant frame for assessing human contribution? How does this relate to our freedom and sovereignty as individuals and as institutions? What was lost and what was gained in that transition? What alternative traditions — of craft, vocation, care, or collective achievement — might inform different approaches today?
- **Performance as a legal standard:** The law's measure of capacity and the limits of what can be demanded. Across legal domains, performance is not only observed and rewarded but normatively constructed: the law determines what can reasonably be expected of individuals — and where that expectation must stop. Tax law assesses citizens by their ability to pay (*wirtschaftliche Leistungsfähigkeit*), choosing proxies — income, wealth, consumption — for a capacity it cannot directly observe; social insurance law mirrors this by defining incapacity and the residual capacity one must still use; employment law fixes a standard of diligent performance owed under contract. How do constitutions and legislatures turn the diffuse idea of performance or potential performance into operable legal measures?
- **Measurement and its limits:** What do performance metrics actually capture, and what do they systematically miss? How do measurement systems shape behavior, institutions, and the distribution of recognition and reward? How can organizations design evaluation systems that are both rigorous and honest about their limitations? How does the dominating institutional logic influence our conception of performance?
- **Relational and collective dimensions of performance:** How do individual contributions depend on and emerge from collaborative structures, shared knowledge, social norms, and

institutional context? How can organizations, firms, and states better recognize and sustain the forms of work that enable others to perform?

- **Performance, merit, and social cohesion:** How does meritocratic ideology shape attitudes towards inequality, solidarity, and belonging? What are the psychological and political consequences of cultures that attribute success and failure primarily to individual effort? How do these dynamics differ across class, gender, migration background, and generation?
- **Demographic change and the future of performance:** How should economies, welfare states, and organizations adapt their performance frameworks in the face of ageing populations and shifting dependency ratios? What does it mean to harness the productive potential of longer working lives — and what forms of contribution risk being undervalued in the process?
- **Performance in politics and public life:** How has performance rhetoric shaped contemporary political culture? What are the effects of applying private-sector performance logics to public institutions, welfare provision, and democratic governance?

We are particularly interested in projects that interrogate the interplay between the historical and the contemporary, the individual and the structural, and the normative and the empirical — and that bring genuine disciplinary depth to bear on questions with broad societal relevance. We are looking for innovative solutions to the challenges associated with today's performance-oriented mindset.

Research Fellowships

1 Expectations

Fellows are expected to be in residence in St.Gallen or in its environs during the academic year 2027/2028 and spend their work days on the campus of the University of St.Gallen. They will be provided shared office space and access to all campus amenities. During their Collegium year, fellows must be free from any obligations at their home institutions so that they can focus on their research in St.Gallen.

Fellows will be able to dedicate two-thirds of their Collegium time to their own research projects related to the annual theme. The Collegium will also make sure to introduce the fellows to St.Gallen faculty who share their interests and whose research endeavors might be relevant to them.

In addition, the seven research fellows will spend a third of their time establishing and developing a joint project with the support of a St.Gallen faculty member who acts as convenor and moderator. Fellows are thus expected to interact regularly, to be willing and keen on learning from each other, to collaborate across disciplinary boundaries, and to engage with invited faculty and guests who can contribute to the joint project.

St.Gallen Collegium will organize events throughout the academic year to engage with the University community and the public. Fellows are expected to join select events, to present and discuss their own work as well as aspects of the joint project.

The working language at St.Gallen Collegium is English.

2 Types of Research Fellowships

St.Gallen Collegium is awarding the following research fellowships:

- **3 Senior Fellowships:** senior fellows are established scholars of any field; Associate Professors/Readers, Full Professors, emeriti/emeritae, as well as independent scholars are welcome to apply. They receive a stipend of CHF 130,000 (gross) for the academic year (September-May). Three fellowships are named in honor of our donors: the Ria und Arthur Dietschweiler Fellowship, Michael Hilti Fellowship, and the SENN Fellowship.
- **2 Junior Fellowships for young scholars from the global south:** two fellowships are designated for advanced doctoral students or early postdoctoral scholars who are currently working at a university in the global south, preferably at an African university. They receive a stipend of CHF 80,000 (gross) for the academic year (September-May).
- **Hans Christoph Binswanger Fellowship for a post-doctoral scholar:** see separate application procedure.

3 Application

Please note that the **Hans Christoph Binswanger Fellowship** requires different documents. Please see the specific call for application.

For all other research fellowships, please include the following documents in your application:

- CV; please highlight any experience you may have in interdisciplinary collaborative projects.
- List of publications; please highlight three key publications pertaining to the annual theme.
- Letter of motivation (max. 2 pages).
- Short outline (max. 2 pages) of the research you plan to pursue during your Collegium year.
- If you are an advanced doctoral student or postdoctoral scholar, please include two letters of recommendation as well.

Please combine all documents in one PDF file and submit it **by Sunday, October 18, 2026, 2026 via e-mail to collegium@unisg.ch**. Short-listed candidates will be invited for an interview via Zoom in October/**November**. Fellows will be notified after the final selection by the Advisory Board by the end of November.

Should you have any questions regarding the application process or the Collegium as such, please contact collegium@unisg.ch. Please note that queries will not be answered during the month of July – we apologize for this inconvenience.

Outreach Fellowship

1 Profile & Expectations

Each year, an outreach fellow joins St.Gallen Collegium and works with the research fellows in the context of the joint project. The outreach fellow is part of the collaborative process and simultaneously a bridgebuilder who makes the work and findings of the Collegium more accessible to a broader audience.

Outreach fellows can come from various fields and work with a wide range of media or other means and tools to let the public partake in the results of the Collegium's collective effort. St.Gallen Collegium welcomes applications by science journalists, writers, independent scholars, artists, and other creative minds. **Outreach fellows work effectively in both English and German.** In contrast to the research fellows who reside throughout the year, St.Gallen Collegium is open to establishing a residency schedule with the outreach fellow. Should the outreach fellow be in residence during the entire academic year, they will receive a stipend of CHF 100,000 (gross); for shorter stays, the stipend will be adapted accordingly.

2 Application

Please include the following documents in your application as an outreach fellow:

- CV; please highlight any experience you may have working alongside researchers.
- Letter of motivation (max. 2 pages)
- Short outline (max. 2 pages) of your interest in the annual theme and of your vision how to make the Collegium's work and findings accessible to a broader audience.

Please combine all documents in one PDF file and submit it **by Sunday, October 18, 2026, via e-mail to collegium@unisg.ch**. Short-listed candidates will be invited for an interview via Zoom in October/**November**. The fellow will be notified after the final selection by the Advisory Board at the end of November.

Should you have any questions regarding the application process or the Collegium as such, please contact collegium@unisg.ch. Please note that queries will not be answered during the month of July – we apologize for this inconvenience.