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MRI Frequently Asked Questions

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GENERAL

1. **How do I find recent MRI awards to see what types of awards are made by the program?**

   The NSF Award search page (Advanced Search at
   http://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/advancedSearch.jsp) can be used to search for MRI awards using
   MRI "Element Code" 1189 in the box under "Element Code". Enter a desired topic for the search
   under "Keyword".

ELIGIBILITY

2. **What is the difference between a "non-Ph.D.-granting institution" and a "non-degree-granting organization"?**

   Non -Ph.D.-granting institutions of higher education are accredited colleges and universities
   (including two-year community colleges) that award Associate's degrees, Bachelor's degrees,
   and/or Master's degrees in NSF-supported fields, but have awarded 20 or fewer Ph.D./D.Sc.
   degrees in all NSF-supported fields during the combined previous two academic years. Non -
   degree-granting organizations are those that do not award Associate's degrees, Bachelor's
   degrees, Master's degrees, and/or Ph.Ds. or Ds.Sc. For the purposes of the MRI program, non-
   degree-granting organizations also include institutions of higher education that award all of their
   degrees outside of NSF-supported fields; for example, many medical schools or colleges of
   pharmacy.

3. **What is the difference between a "consortium" and a "collaborative proposal"?**

   A *collaborative proposal* represents a funding mechanism, used NSF-wide, by which
   investigators from two or more organizations who wish to collaborate on a unified project may
   submit proposals and share funding. Collaborative proposals may be submitted to NSF in one of
   two methods: as a single proposal, in which a single award is being requested (with subawards
   administered by the lead organization); or by simultaneous submission of proposals from different
   organizations, with each organization requesting a separate award (Chapter II.D.4 of the Grant
   Proposal Guide provides additional information on collaborative proposals). For acquisition
   proposals from Ph.D. -granting or non-degree-granting institutions, only the latter method should
   be used.

   The MRI program defines *consortia* as a category of submission -eligible organizations to better
   facilitate proposals that provide access to unique instrumentation for a broad user base of U.S.
   scientists and engineers, and that encourage greater collaboration and sharing of state-of-the-art
   instrumentation (the MRI-specific definitions of consortia are included in the solicitation). The MRI
   program accepts proposals from two types of consortia -legally incorporated consortia located in
   the US with 501(c)(3) status and consortia organized specifically to support an MRI project. If a
   consortium has 501(c)(3) status and has the appropriate administrative and financial infrastructure
   to receive and manage a federal grant directly, then it may submit a consortium proposal directly.
   Otherwise, a consortium must include at least two MRI submission -eligible organizations, and a
   proposal from such an MRI consortium must be submitted by one of its submission -eligible
   organizations on behalf of the consortium. In either case, the proposal will count against the
   submitting organization's MRI submission limit.

   Collaborative proposals need not be consortium proposals and consortium proposals may or may
   not be collaborative proposals.

4. **When should I use "MRI Consortium" and/or "MRI Collaborative" in the title of the**

proposal?

An MRI proposal must be entitled "MRI Collaborative: ¦" when it is linked to one or more other proposals in a simultaneous submission of proposals from different organizations, with each organization requesting a separate award directly from NSF to support their role in a collaborative MRI project. No other type of MRI proposal should include the phrase "MRI Collaborative: ¦". Proposals that involve participants from other institutions, but do not involve the transfer or sharing of funds, or where partner organizations are funded through subawards, should not include "Collaborative" in the title.

An MRI proposal should include the phrase "MRI Consortium" when the proposal is from a legally incorporated consortium or one submitted by a single submission -eligible organization on behalf of a consortium organized specifically to support the MRI project. Collaborative work in a "MRI Consortium" for instrument development may be funded through a subaward mechanism and may, in some cases, include funding for an organization or organizations in the consortium that is or are not eligible to submit MRI proposals.

5. **Is resubmission of a previously declined MRI proposal allowed?**

Updated proposals from previous competitions can be submitted, but only after they have undergone substantial revision that takes into account the major comments or concerns resulting from the prior NSF review. The Foundation will treat the revised proposal as a new proposal, subject to the standard review procedures. Proposals submitted to any prior MRI competition, suitably revised as noted above and in compliance with the appropriate MRI solicitation and Grant Proposal Guide, may be eligible for the current competition.

6. **If a *PI or Co-PI* has received previous MRI awards, does that make them ineligible to submit a MRI proposal?**

No. Although institutional submission limits may be a factor, there is no limit on the number of MRI projects in which a PI/Co -PI may participate in a given proposal cycle or over a period of time. Please note that results from prior MRI awards (within the past five years) must be summarized in the Project Description of the current proposal.

7. **Is there a limit to the number of MRI awards that an *organization* is eligible to receive?**

In any given MRI competition, an organization can submit (and potentially receive awards for) three proposals as long as at least one is for instrument development. The number of awards received in prior MRI competitions is not a factor. However, so that reviewers can better assess stewardship of previously awarded instruments, the MRI solicitation requires that the institution provide, within the organization's commitment letter (two-page maximum), a list of the MRI awards made to the organization during the previous five years and a brief summary of the status of the instrument obtained with each award.

8. **Does a subaward to an organization count against that organization's proposal submission limit?**

Acquisition proposals: Subawards may only be included in acquisition proposals from non-Ph.D.-granting institutions. In general, collaborative acquisition proposals where funding goes to multiple partners should be submitted as separately submitted, linked, collaborative proposals. Funding to a vendor should appear on the Equipment line of the budget, not the Subaward line. Inclusion as a funded subawardee on any acquisition proposal will be counted against the subawardee

organization's proposal submission limit.

Development proposals: Inclusion as a subawardee on a development proposal at a level in excess of 20% of the total budget request from NSF will be counted against an organization's proposal submission limit. However, if a subaward to an organization in a *development proposal* is 20% or less of the proposal's total budget request from NSF, the subawardee's submission limit will not be affected.   For subawards within a linked collaborative proposal, the 20% threshold applies to the budget request from NSF in the proposal containing the subaward(s), not to the combined budget request from NSF for the collaborative project.

COST SHARING

9. **What is the required level of cost sharing, and which organizations are required to provide it?**

    Ph.D.-granting institutions of higher education and non-degree-granting organizations are required to cost-share at the level of 30% of the total MRI-eligible project cost (this is not 30% of the amount requested of NSF, but rather 30% of the total amount needed to accomplish the project. Ph.D.-granting institutions of higher education are accredited colleges and universities that have awarded more than 20 Ph.Ds. or Ds.Sc. in all NSF-supported fields during the combined previous two academic years. Additionally, any organization that awards Ph.D. or D.Sc. degrees in NSF-supported fields is considered to be a Ph.D.-granting institution if the only degrees it awards in NSF-supported fields are post-Bachelor's degrees. Non-degree-granting organizations are those that do not award Associate's degrees, Bachelor's degrees, Master's degrees, and/or Ph.Ds. or Ds.Sc. Non-degree-granting organizations also include institutions of higher education that award all of their degrees outside of NSF-supported fields; for example, many medical schools or colleges of pharmacy.

10. **My organization is required to cost share but is willing to contribute MRI-eligible resources that amount to more than 30% of the total MRI-eligible project costs. Is this allowed?**

    Cost sharing, when required, must be exactly 30% of the total project cost. Inclusion of voluntary committed cost sharing is prohibited and Line M on the prospective awardee's proposal budget must include only the mandatory 30% cost-sharing amount.

11. **What resources are eligible cost-sharing expenses?**

    Cost sharing must be for eligible MRI expenses, and may be cash or in-kind. Eligible (and ineligible) MRI expenses are discussed in the solicitation. Cost sharing must come from non-Federal sources. Expenditures on required cost sharing are subject to audit for amount and eligibility.

12. **Resources beyond those included as cost sharing or being requested from NSF are required. How do I demonstrate my organization's commitment to provide them?**

    In order to assess the scope of the project, all organizational resources necessary for the project must be described in the Facilities, Equipment and Other Resources section of the proposal. The description should be narrative in nature and must not include any quantifiable financial information. These resources are not financially auditable by NSF and should not be included in the proposal budget or budget justification. Additionally, a supplemental letter documenting the commitment(s) for operation and maintenance of the instrument over its expected lifetime is

required. This letter (two-page maximum) should also list the MRI awards made to the organization during the previous five years and briefly describe the status of the instrument obtained with each award.

13. **Where can I find further information on cost sharing?**

Prospective proposers should contact their sponsored projects office for guidance on cost sharing. Further information can be found in the Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards (Uniform Guidance) (2 CFR, Part 200). 2 CFR §200.306 describes criteria and procedures for the allowability of cash and in-kind contributions in satisfying cost sharing and matching requirements. Additional guidance on cost sharing is available from NSF's Cost Analysis and Audit Resolution Branch at http://www.nsf.gov/bfa/dias/caar/index.jsp. Some additional limitations on eligibility of costs are described in the solicitation.

14. **Can a vendor discount be used as cost sharing?**

No. As noted in the solicitation, manufacturers' discounts are strongly encouraged for reducing project costs but they may not be designated as cost sharing.

15. **If a room needs to be renovated or modified to accommodate an instrument, can the associated expense be used as cost-sharing?**

No. Cost sharing must be associated with MRI-eligible expenses. Room renovations and other categories of expenses that MRI does not support cannot be used as cost sharing.

16. **Does cost sharing have to be provided in the first year of an award?**

Cost-sharing commitments must be met by the end of the award period, which may be greater than one year depending on the award.

17. **My institution is required to cost share, but our development proposal has subawards to organizations that are exempt from the cost-sharing requirement. What is the required cost-sharing level?**

If the submitting organization is required to cost share, but one or more subawardee is exempt from the cost-sharing requirement, the 30% cost-sharing requirement applies to only the portion of the total project cost budgeted to the non-exempt organization(s). The submitting organization, as the entity that is legally responsible for ensuring the commitment is met, must list the total cost sharing amount in its budget (Line M). Cost sharing must be for MRI-eligible expenses, may come from third party sources, but cannot come from Federal sources.

18. **My institution is exempt from the cost-sharing requirement, but we have subawards to organizations that are not exempt. Is cost sharing still required and at what level?**

If the submitting organization is exempt from the cost-sharing requirement, but one or more subawardee is subject to cost-sharing, the 30% cost-sharing requirement applies to only the portion of the total project cost budgeted to the non-exempt organization(s). Cost sharing can come from any organization participating in the project that belongs to a category for which cost sharing would be required, or third party sources, but the submitting organization, as the entity that is legally responsible for ensuring the commitment is met, must list the total cost-sharing amount in

its budget (Line M). Cost sharing must be for MRI-eligible expenses and cannot come from Federal sources.

19. **Which organizations are exempt from cost sharing?**

Only non-Ph.D.-granting academic institutions of higher education (accredited colleges and universities, including two-year community colleges, that award Associate's degrees, Bachelor's degrees, and/or Master's degrees in NSF-supported fields, but have awarded 20 or fewer Ph.D./D.Sc. degrees in all NSF-supported fields during the combined previous two academic years) are exempt from the cost-sharing requirement.

20. **My organization is exempt from cost share but is willing to contribute resources as voluntary cost sharing. Is this allowed?**

No. Inclusion of voluntary committed cost sharing is prohibited and Line M on the proposal budget must remain blank if cost sharing is not required for the project as a whole. In order to assess the scope of the project, all organizational resources necessary for the project must be described in the Facilities, Equipment and Other Resources section of the proposal. The description should be narrative in nature and must not include any quantifiable financial information. These resources are not financially auditable by NSF and should not be included in the proposal budget or budget justification.

ELIGIBLE REQUESTS

21. **I have been told that my budget request seems high compared to the average award size from recent years (as found from an abstract search on the NSF web page). Should I make my budget more in line with the average award size?**

MRI proposals should describe the science and engineering research and research training that are planned. The scope of the instrument request should follow from the planned activities, and the budget should be well-aligned with the scope of the instrument to be acquired or developed. Requests that ask for too little to accomplish the goals will appear to reviewers as poorly thought out, just as requests that ask for too much to accomplish the goals will be perceived as poorly thought out. Ask for what you need; no more, no less. Remember that MRI awards can be as high as $4 million, and as low as $100,000 (or lower for non-Ph.D.-granting institutions or certain research fields called out in the solicitation).

22. **Can my organization submit more than one development proposal?**

Yes. Eligible organizations may submit up to three MRI proposals as long as at least one is a development proposal.

23. **Can an instrument development proposal include research activities which are needed to mature enabling technologies that will later be used to develop an instrument, provide an upgrade for the instrument in the future, or otherwise develop another instrument?**

No. The MRI program does not support early research and development of enabling technologies for future use in instrument development. Development proposals should incorporate relatively mature technologies that can lead to a usable, stable instrument for research at the end of the award period.

24. **Does MRI support renovation or modernization of facilities or infrastructure if the costs are associated with installation of an instrument?**

No. Expenses associated with construction and/or improvements of supporting infrastructure are not eligible MRI costs, either as a request from NSF or as cost sharing. This includes (but is not limited to) the installation of or upgrades to infrastructure related to the supply of power, ventilation, water or research gases, routine multi-purpose computer networks, standard safety features, and other general purpose systems (e.g., toxic waste removal systems and telecommunications equipment.)

25. **Is an auxiliary piece of equipment part of the instrument or part of the facility infrastructure?**

Auxiliary equipment, such as a vacuum pump or power supply, that is integral and dedicated to the operation of the instrument, and would follow the instrument if it were to be moved, might be considered to be part of the instrument. Auxiliary equipment that would remain and be repurposed if an instrument is moved, that is not specifically designed to support the instrument, or that is not dedicated to a single instrument is generally considered infrastructure and is not supported by MRI.

26. **Does MRI allow for acquisition of multiple instruments?**

No; however, a single instrument may consist of an ensemble of pieces of equipment. For the purposes of the MRI program, proposals must be for either acquisition or development of a single, shared-use, state-of-the art, well-integrated instrument. A well-integrated research instrument means that the ensemble of equipment that defines the instrument enables a specific research experiment or type of research experiment to be undertaken; separating or removing an element or component of such an integrated instrument would preclude the planned experiments from occurring or succeeding. NSF and/or reviewers have to be convinced that the combined equipment can be viewed as a single instrument and not a suite of instruments to outfit a research laboratory/ facility nor a capability that is intended to be used as separate components. The statement of the specific research and research training for which the instrument will be used and the management plan should serve to establish that an ensemble of equipment constitutes a single well-integrated instrument. Examples include, an array of seismometers deployed to study a specific fault zone, or a pair of telescopes that will be permanently used as an interferometer.

27. **Can you give me an example of an appropriate request for equipment that when combined (physically or virtually) serves as an integrated research instrument?**

The PI has the responsibility to justify that the equipment being requested will be integrated and will serve as an integrated research instrument, and NSF reserves the right to return without review proposals that are deemed to violate MRI guidelines on appropriate requests. Examples of proposals for integrated instrumentation that have been generally accepted and reviewed in the past include arrays of homogenous instruments (e.g. interferometric arrays of sensors), distributed heterogeneous arrays of sensors to capture comprehensive time-series data on complex phenomena, and multiple instruments tightly integrated into a single instrumentation package that is deployed into the field as a single unit. Similarity of a proposal to a past MRI proposal that was accepted for review, however, does not guarantee that the current proposal will be accepted.

28. **The instrumentation I am requesting will be used for research, but it will also be available for educational and outreach purposes (e.g., courses and outreach activities) as well. Will this use disqualify the proposal?**

No. The use of the instrument in educational and outreach efforts can be cited as a broader impact, but the preponderance of use of the instrument must be research and research training.

29. **Can I, as a faculty member, request salary support?**

Any requests for salary to be included as part of the total project cost (whether funds directly requested from NSF or cost sharing, if applicable) must be consistent with the Grant Proposal Guide requirements and allowable by the MRI guidelines. (For example, for acquisition projects, salary support, including fringe benefits and indirect costs, is considered an eligible cost only for personnel directly involved in maintaining the instrument or providing appropriate technical support to operate the instrument.) Such requests must be well justified, and be commensurate with the technical expertise and time required for the scale and scope of the instrument. Salary support, including fringe benefits and indirect costs, is considered an eligible cost only for personnel directly involved in maintaining the instrument or providing appropriate technical support to operate the instrument.) Such requests must be well justified, and be commensurate with the technical expertise and time required for the scale and scope of the instrument.

30. **Is technician time an allowable expense for operating and maintaining the instrument?**

Costs to support a technician directly involved in maintaining the instrument or providing appropriate technical support to operate the instrument are eligible MRI costs during the award period for the time she or he spends in that role. Costs for a technician or other personnel to assist in obtaining research results, research training, outreach or education are not eligible MRI costs.

31. **What is meant by operations and maintenance?**

"Operations and maintenance" includes only those activities which are required to keep the instrument ready for use by the research community, such as calibration, routine maintenance (e.g. lubrication, replacement of limited-life components), performing start-up/shutdown procedures as required, etc. "Operations" does not include operating the instrument for the purpose of conducting research or to obtain research results or demonstrating the usefulness of the instrument to interested parties.

32. **Is there a limit on salary requests for personnel associated with development proposals?**

No. However, proposals must justify the skill level and time commitment (and hence the associated portion of the total project cost) for any personnel associated with development efforts. While there is no prescribed balance between the funding requested for labor and materials in a development proposal, reviewers will carefully examine the appropriateness of salary requests.

33. **Are education/outreach expenses eligible costs?**

No. MRI supports the acquisition and development of instruments, but does not fund the activities that are enabled by the instrument. Expenses associated with education and outreach activities are not allowed.

34. **Can a foreign co-PI or collaborator be included in my proposal?**

Yes, but MRI will not pay the expenses of the foreign participation. An unfunded foreign

collaborator can be included in the proposal, with roles and responsibilities described in the Project Description and a statement of collaboration (per the solicitation guidelines) provided as a supplemental document. An unfunded foreign collaborator can be included on the Cover Sheet as a co-PI only if the collaborator has been registered in FastLane by their home organization.

35. **Is the duration of this grant limited to one year for acquisition, or can the duration include more than one year of maintenance expenses, including service contracts?**

Proposers may request an award period of up to three years for acquisition proposals. The costs of service contracts and supplies needed to maintain and calibrate the equipment during the award period may be included in the total project cost if justified in the proposal. For acquisition proposals from organizations subject to the cost-sharing requirement, these may only be included in the cost share portion of the total project cost. Costs for supplies that are consumed during research or research training activities (e.g. reagents, solvents, and sample preparation materials) are not MRI eligible expenses.

36. **Can I request an upgrade of an existing instrument?**

Yes. As noted in the solicitation, MRI proposals may include the upgrade of an existing instrument.

37. **Can I request a used/refurbished instrument or must it be a new model?**

The MRI program does support the acquisition of used/refurbished instruments. A strong case must be made in any proposal that the requested instrument is appropriate for the scale and scope of the proposed projects, and that proper maintenance and technical support will be provided to keep the instrument available for use. The proposal will have to carefully document and justify the fair market price of the instrument.

38. **My institution is currently leasing an instrument and would like to purchase it. Is this allowed by MRI?**

Yes. The MRI program will consider requests to purchase an instrument that is currently being leased. The proposal will have to carefully document and justify the fair market price of the instrument.

39. **The MRI solicitation notes that incremental costs associated with the implementation of the Data Management Plan are allowable expenses. What can I ask for?**

Incremental costs associated with implementing the Data Management Plan requirement (see the NSF Grant Proposal Guide Chapter II.C.2.j) may be included in the total project cost of MRI projects provided that they are treated in a way that is consistent with the solicitation. MRI provides for the acquisition or development of an instrument but does not support the research that is enabled. However, a plan for managing data that is generated by the instrument is required. The incremental costs associated with implementing this plan will vary greatly depending on the project, but may include expenses related to data storage and archiving, creating the capability to place data in a regional or national repository, cyberinfrastructure that enables data sharing, etc. For example, if there are equipment costs associated with the data management plan, these may be included in the equipment part of the requested funds, or in cost sharing, if applicable. Costs associated with the implementation of the Data Management Plan should be incremental.

REQUIRED DOCUMENTATION

40. **Do I need to include a letter certifying my organization's degree-granting status, even if I have a cost sharing commitment letter, or even if the organization is not subject to cost sharing?**

    Yes, a letter certifying the organization's status as PhD-granting, non-PhD-granting, or non-degree-granting (per the definitions in the solicitation) is required for *all* funded organizations in *all* proposals. Failure to provide the required certification(s) may be grounds for returning the proposal without review. A "Research in Undergraduate Institutions" (RUI) certification may *not* be used for non-PhD-granting institutions.

41. **If I am requesting funds in the budget for postdoctoral personnel, am I required to provide a postdoctoral mentoring plan as part of the proposal?**

    Yes. If a proposal requests funds to support postdoctoral personnel then a mentoring plan is required as a one-page maximum supplemental document. Failure to provide a mentoring plan when required will result in the proposal being returned without review. For further information on this topic, please consult the Grant Proposal Guide (Chapter II.C.2.j).

SUGGESTED DOCUMENTATION

42. **From whom is a statement of collaboration needed?**

    Reviewers should know that an individual participant in the project knows and agrees that she or he will play a role in a project. It is up to the PI to determine which, if any, of the project's participants should provide a formal statement of collaboration. Statements of collaboration from major users of the proposed instrument may also be included. Statements from every possible user of an instrument, or from minor participants in a project, are not necessary and are discouraged. Note that the format for statements of collaboration from individuals is specified in the solicitation. More extensive statements of collaboration or letters endorsing the project will not be accepted.

    If a proposed effort involves a private sector partner, a large formal collaboration or an organization (as opposed to an individual(s)) serving as a partner, a separate supplementary document letter (one page maximum) confirming the participation must be included. Proposals involving large formal collaborations are encouraged to utilize this letter to document the priority of the requested instrument in the overall efforts being undertaken by the collaboration.

UNALLOWED DOCUMENTATION

43. **Does the MRI program accept hard-copy proposals, statements of collaboration, or other documents outside of the FastLane or Grants.gov systems?**

    No. All allowed documents must be included in the electronic submission (FastLane or Grants.gov) of the proposal. There is no mechanism to accept any documentation outside of the approved electronic submission processes. Material sent by U.S. mail or overnight delivery will not be accepted.

44. **Can I submit color hard copies of my proposal by regular mail?**

    No. The MRI program is not able to accept documents, including color copies, outside of the

electronic submission process.

45. **Is a letter of intent required?**

No. A letter of intent is neither required nor accepted.

PROPOSALS AND PROPOSAL SUBMISSION

46. **What is the earliest start date that I can request?**

The earliest anticipated start date that can be requested is August 1, after submission. Please note, because of the time required to process award recommendations, it may not be possible for NSF to honor a request for an August 1 start date. If there is an urgent requirement for an August 1 start, this should be noted and explained in the proposal.

47. **Should I use FastLane or Grants.gov for my proposal submission?**

The option to use either FastLane or Grants.gov has been provided for this competition. You may use either method to submit most proposals. However, all linked-collaborative proposals submitted as separate submissions from multiple organizations must be submitted via the NSF FastLane system. Chapter II, Section D.4 of the Grant Proposal Guide provides additional information on collaborative proposals. For technical reasons, the order in which supplemental documents are included in the proposal may not be preserved for proposal submitted through Grants.gov.

48. **Is the submission deadline flexible?**

No. Proposals submitted after the deadline will not be accepted. The MRI program strongly recommends that organizations submit proposals well before the deadline, and that PIs check to ensure that the proposal as submitted is actually correct in format and content, and that it appears exactly as it was intended to be submitted. Corrections to proposals can be made by proposal file updates prior to the submission deadline, but not after the deadline has passed.