



U.S. NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION  
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**NSF 25-029**

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for NSF Scholarships in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (S-STEM) (NSF 25-514)

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### FINANCIAL AID, PROPOSAL BUDGET AND OTHER FINANCIAL ASPECTS

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1. [How should an institution define low-income?](#)
2. [How should our project determine that a graduate student is low-income?](#)
3. [Are there any other examples of mechanisms to determine if a graduate student is low-income?](#)
4. [How should scholarships be used to meet students' unmet financial need?](#)
5. [Could a prospective S-STEM scholarship be considered by admissions or financial aid when determining whether a scholar might receive other merit- or need-based funding?](#)
6. [Can the scholarship cover materials \(such as textbooks, laptops and class supplies\) in addition to tuition?](#)

### ELIGIBILITY

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7. [How do I know that the disciplines of the degrees supported by my proposal are eligible disciplines funded by NSF? Is there a list? Does the NSF maintain a list of disciplinary fields that are eligible to receive research funding?](#)
8. [What are degrees that are always excluded from S-STEM?](#)
9. [My institution's business school offers coursework towards a B.S. or B.A. degree in Business Administration in computer information systems \(or information technology\) that has many STEM requirements. Is this degree eligible?](#)
10. [Last year, our institution received an award to support students pursuing bachelor's degrees in physics, mathematics, chemistry, and biology. For this S-STEM solicitation, my institution wants to submit a proposal with the computer science and mathematics departments as the partnering departments. Is my institution eligible to submit this](#)

proposal this cycle?

11. I would like to require that my scholars pursue a specific minor or certificate as part of their studies. I would also like to use interest in this minor or certificate as a selection criterion. Is this permissible?
12. Can the S-STEM scholarship support for-credit certificates at my institution if the students are enrolled full time in an eligible degree program?
13. Are part-time students eligible?
14. Can the selection criteria for scholars give additional consideration to low-income students from underrepresented groups in STEM?
15. Can the selection criteria for scholars give additional consideration to low-income students with specific career or education goals, interests in specific subareas of their major discipline, enthusiasm for particular components of the project, or other similar factors?
16. Can each institution submit two proposals per track, or just two proposals total to any track?
17. Can an institution submit two proposals with overlapping degrees if the target population of students is different (e.g., one targets transfer students and the other one targets juniors and seniors)?
18. My institution last had a 5-year S-STEM grant that was awarded in February 2015. Would I be eligible to submit a proposal to Track 1 of the S-STEM program under the new solicitation criteria?

## **ABOUT CURRICULAR AND CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

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19. What types of activities can be required of scholars? Is lack of participation a cause for dismissal?
20. Can undergraduate research be required as part of the commitments a student makes to receive the scholarship? Are research experiences for undergraduates encouraged?

## **EVALUATION AND RESEARCH COMPONENTS**

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21. Are research and evaluation required in all tracks of the S-STEM program?
22. What do you mean by "external" evaluator?
23. Are there expectations as to what percentage of the budget should be allocated for evaluation?

## **MISCELLANEOUS**

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24. Does the program prefer to have scholars from multiple disciplines rather than scholars from one discipline only (e.g., chemistry, biology, math, physics vs. mechanical engineering only)?
  25. The duration of an S-STEM scholarship is 5 years per degree or institution. What does that mean for students at 2-year colleges?
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## **FINANCIAL AID, PROPOSAL BUDGET AND OTHER FINANCIAL ASPECTS**

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### **1. How should an institution define low-income?**

The definition of low-income is up to the institution and should be specified in a letter from the institution's Office of Financial Aid (included as a supplementary document). The definition can use Pell-eligibility, the regional poverty level, median household income, or other metrics that are appropriate. Failure to include the required letter from the Office of Financial Aid at all institutions that would award scholarships will result in a proposal being returned without review.

### **2. How should our project determine that a graduate student is low-income?**

For graduate students, the definition of low income must be determined by the proposing institution's Office of Financial Aid. It is up to the institution to devise a mechanism to check for eligibility.

Some institutions ask candidates to submit proof of their total income, such as income taxes. Other mechanisms to collect this information are also possible, and NSF does not mandate or interfere with institutional policy in that regard. An important aspect here is to determine when graduate students are independent from the income of their parents. Some U. S. Department of Education guidelines state that, in general, students who are older than 24 years of age by the time the scholarship is granted and have filed separate income tax returns from their parents for at least two years prior to the application date, are considered independent. Also, students who are married, are head of the family, have children of their own, or are veterans are generally considered independent. For those students deemed independent, their reported income (not including the income of their parents) can be used to establish eligibility.

### **3. Are there any other examples of mechanisms to determine if a graduate student is low-income?**

Yes. Even though graduate students cannot receive Pell Grants, some institutions ask prospective graduate scholars to complete the FAFSA and declare individuals as low

income if their Student Aid Index (SAI) indicates that they would be Pell-eligible.

**4. How should scholarships be used to meet students' unmet financial need?**

S-STEM is a last-dollar scholarship, which means that the Office of Financial Aid should calculate the unmet need of each student after other scholarships, grants, and fellowships are awarded and applied towards the Cost of Attendance. Loans and income from work should be excluded. S-STEM should cover any remaining unmet need up to the Cost of Attendance, which is defined by each institution, not exceeding \$15,000 per undergraduate student per year and \$20,000 per graduate student per year.

**5. Could a prospective S-STEM scholarship be considered by admissions or financial aid when determining whether a scholar might receive other merit- or need-based funding?**

Absolutely not. As a last-dollar scholarship, selection as an S-STEM Scholar should not be used by institutions to reduce other awards that the student is eligible to receive. Admissions and/or financial aid should make all award determinations without considering S-STEM support.

**6. Can the scholarship cover materials (such as textbooks, laptops and class supplies) in addition to tuition?**

The S-STEM scholarship covers Cost of Attendance (COA) up to fifteen thousand dollars (\$15,000) per year for undergraduate students and twenty thousand dollars (\$20,000) per year for graduate students. Each institution defines what its COA includes, but most include more than tuition costs, such as textbooks, a laptop computer, room and board, transportation, childcare, etc. Any items incorporated in the definition of COA may be supported with S-STEM scholarship funds. Proposers are encouraged to confer with their colleagues in financial aid to determine what items/categories are included in the institutional COA.

## **ELIGIBILITY**

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**7. How do I know that the disciplines of the degrees supported by my proposal are eligible disciplines funded by NSF? Is there a list? Does the NSF maintain a list of disciplinary fields that are eligible to receive research funding?**

No, NSF does not maintain a list of eligible degrees. The NSF website is a good source of information. Each directorate maintains a web page that describes their research programs: <https://new.nsf.gov/focus-areas>. Proposers are encouraged to examine current NSF program awards to determine if their focus suggests reasonable alignment with the focus and curriculum of the degree programs that would be included in an S-

STEM proposal.

Please note that clinical fields, degrees in business administration at all levels, and students pursuing STEM teacher certification/licensure (regardless of degree program) are not eligible.

Proposers are strongly encouraged to contact an S-STEM program officer before submitting a proposal if they have questions concerning degree or disciplinary eligibility.

**8. What are degrees that are always excluded from S-STEM?**

As the solicitation states, all clinical fields are excluded, including but not limited to nursing, medicine, veterinary medicine, and other health or medically oriented degrees such as pharmacy, physical therapy, clinical psychology, nutrition, counseling, occupational therapy, etc. Also, business degrees, such as B.S. in Business Administration, MBAs etc. are excluded. Furthermore, students pursuing teacher licensure, regardless of degree program, are not eligible to receive S-STEM funding.

**9. My institution's business school offers coursework towards a B.S. or B.A. degree in Business Administration in computer information systems (or information technology) that has many STEM requirements. Is this degree eligible?**

Business school programs that lead to Bachelor of Business Administration or Bachelor of Arts or Science in Business Administration degrees (BABA/BSBA/BBA) are not eligible for S-STEM funding. However, if, for example, the degree awarded is a BS in Information Technology or Information Systems, the degree could be eligible even if housed within a business school.

**10. Last year, our institution received an award to support students pursuing bachelor's degrees in physics, mathematics, chemistry, and biology. For this S-STEM solicitation, my institution wants to submit a proposal with the computer science and mathematics departments as the partnering departments. Is my institution eligible to submit this proposal this cycle?**

The restriction on overlapping S-STEM proposals is checked at the degree level, using the required Project Details table included in the supplementary documents. This document must list all scholarship-eligible degrees supported by the proposal.

For example, if the proposal awarded last year supports students pursuing a B.A. in Mathematics and the new proposal supports students with a B.S. in Data Science or Computer Science, there is no overlap. Now, if the new proposal supports students pursuing a B.A. in Mathematics and a B.S. in Computer Science, and scholars will get a minor in Data Science, then there is an overlap at the degree and major level. Hence, the proposal referenced in this example would be returned without review, and

proposers would need to wait until the successful completion of the third year of the current award to submit a new proposal with overlapping degrees.

- 11. I would like to require that my scholars pursue a specific minor or certificate as part of their studies. I would also like to use interest in this minor or certificate as a selection criterion. Is this permissible?**

No. Interest in or intent to pursue a specific minor or certificate is not an indication of a scholar's academic talent and hence cannot be used as part of scholar selection. Furthermore, as discussed further below, additional activities cannot be required of scholars unless they are required for all students pursuing the same degree.

- 12. Can the S-STEM scholarship support for-credit certificates at my institution if the students are enrolled full time in an eligible degree program?**

No. Scholarship funds can only pay for the Cost of Attendance for a student enrolled in those degree programs. Students are permitted to earn a certificate in the course of their degree program (e.g., by choosing particular electives).

- 13. Are part-time students eligible?**

Yes, part-time students are eligible as long as they are enrolled and take at least 50% of what the institution considers to be a full-time load, are pursuing an eligible degree, and continue to make acceptable academic progress.

- 14. Can the selection criteria for scholars give additional consideration to low-income students from underrepresented groups in STEM?**

No. All students meeting the institutional definition of low-income status and enrolled in degree programs listed in the proposal should receive fair consideration for S-STEM funding based solely on their academic talent and potential. Membership in groups based on a specific demographic or shared experience (e.g., first-generation college attendee) is not permitted as a selection criterion and cannot be used to give preference to individual applicants.

Proposers may recognize, however, that certain populations of students are overrepresented in the pool of prospective scholars or may benefit from specific curricular or co-curricular activities proposed. In this case, the proposal may include targeted recruiting plans to encourage applications from these students. Such efforts will allow the project to leverage the full spectrum of talented, low-income students, which helps to broaden participation, increase the number of US STEM degree recipients, and grow the domestic STEM workforce.

- 15. Can the selection criteria for scholars give additional consideration to low-income**

**students with specific career or education goals, interests in specific subareas of their major discipline, enthusiasm for particular components of the project, or other similar factors?**

No. All students meeting the institutional definition of low-income status and enrolled in degree programs listed in the proposal should receive fair consideration for S-STEM funding based solely on their academic talent and potential. Interest in specific sub-disciplines, intention to participate in project activities, plans for future graduate study, and other similar criteria are not indicators of talent and cannot be used to select scholarship recipients.

**16. Can each institution submit two proposals per track, or just two proposals total to any track?**

An institution may submit a total of two proposals across Tracks 1, 2 and 3 in any submission year.

**17. Can an institution submit two proposals with overlapping degrees if the target population of students is different (e.g., one targets transfer students and the other one targets juniors and seniors)?**

No. The restriction refers to overlapping degrees offered to those students, not to the matriculation status of students pursuing the same degree. If an institution submits two proposals targeting overlapping degrees, one of the proposals will be returned without review.

**18. My institution last had a 5-year S-STEM grant that was awarded in February 2015. Would I be eligible to submit a proposal to Track 1 of the S-STEM program under the new solicitation criteria?**

Eligibility for Track 1 depends on the end date of the most recent S-STEM award to the institution. While it is possible that this institution is now eligible to apply for Track 1, it is important to ascertain the official end date of the award in question. A 2015 award that was granted a no-cost extension would have been active for six years instead of five with a revised end date in 2021. Thus, the institution would have had an active award only 4 years prior to the submission deadline and would not qualify for Track 1. For a submission deadline of March 4, 2025, an institution cannot have had an S-STEM award with an end date later than March 3, 2020.

## **ABOUT CURRICULAR AND CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

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**19. What types of activities can be required of scholars? Is lack of participation a cause for dismissal?**



S-STEM projects often include enhancements such as seminars, graduate school application workshops, field trips, student-faculty interaction outside classes, research opportunities, tutoring, and internships. These valuable opportunities can be strongly encouraged but participation cannot be required of scholars or used as criteria for scholar selection or retention. The primary criteria for continued scholarship eligibility must be satisfactory progress towards a degree or successful transfer and continued determination of low-income status. Under no circumstances should the scholarship funds be structured as compensation for either work or participation in other project activities.

Participation in activities that are part of the regular academic curriculum of a scholar and required for graduation is expected. Given the possibility of additional responsibilities for scholars (e.g., need to work, parenting), proposers are further encouraged to design and schedule activities to allow for flexible participation.

**20. Can undergraduate research be required as part of the commitments a student makes to receive the scholarship? Are research experiences for undergraduates encouraged?**

Scholars cannot be asked to perform additional activities in exchange for the scholarship. As long as scholars are making academic progress towards their degree, their scholarship cannot include requirements outside of those that are part of the scholar's degree program. For instance, scholars can be mandated to conduct research if it is required for the attainment of their degree (e.g., research for Ph.D. students). Outside of degree requirements, proposers can include paid summer or academic year research experiences for students, but such enrichment activities must be paid from those funds not allocated to scholarships.

## **EVALUATION AND RESEARCH COMPONENTS**

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**21. Are research and evaluation required in all tracks of the S-STEM program?**

All proposals must include an evaluation plan. Evaluation plans focus on the execution of the project (formative) and can glean lessons from the successes and challenges that are encountered. A logic model or theory of change is required and should be included as a Supplementary Document and is a good way to convey the evaluation plan.

Education or social science research plans are not required for Track 1 or Track 2 S-STEM proposals. Track 3 proposals, however, must incorporate a research plan. Research plans should be grounded in a social sciences or education research theoretical framework that will allow the results to be relevant beyond the immediate context of the project. Clear research questions, along with data streams and methodological approaches intended to address those questions, are strongly



encouraged in the research plan for Track 3 proposals.

**22. What do you mean by "external" evaluator?**

S-STEM requires an evaluation report to be uploaded as part of each award's annual progress report. This evaluation report should be formative in nature in the first years of implementation and summative in the final year. The external evaluator needs to assess the extent to which the project's goals are being met and provide formative feedback to the project leadership team. The objective of the formative feedback is to course-correct any problems. Hence, the external evaluator is expected to be an independent, objective, and unbiased assessor of the project. This independence can only be accomplished by someone who is not attached to the project as PI or senior personnel nor reports to the PI team in any direct way.

**23. Are there expectations as to what percentage of the budget should be allocated for evaluation?**

No, there is no formal or informal guidance about the percentage of a project budget that should be devoted to evaluation. Depending on the scope of the project and the specific evaluation activities proposed, the time necessary to carry out project evaluation can also vary. External evaluators supported via Consultant Services need to establish their hourly rate and how many hours they are dedicating to the project. The budget justification for the evaluator should provide clear alignment between project goals and components, evaluation activities and the requested evaluation budget. Depending on whether the evaluator is a member of the institution's staff or an independent consultant, budget requirements can vary.

## **MISCELLANEOUS**

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**24. Does the program prefer to have scholars from multiple disciplines rather than scholars from one discipline only (e.g., chemistry, biology, math, physics vs. mechanical engineering only)?**

The S-STEM program does not have a preference, but the solicitation requires the formation of cohorts of scholars to support each other along their academic journeys. Cohort formation assures scholars have a community of peers where they can study and share concerns and experiences.

One way to demonstrate that a strong cohort is possible is if students enroll in some or all courses together and progress on a similar timeline through their shared degree. Alternatively, however, there are projects that have demonstrated that they can form a cohort with scholars from different disciplines supporting each other through a carefully crafted selection of seminars, site visits, and other types of shared experiences.

Ultimately, the burden to convince the panel that cohort formation is possible is on the proposer.

**25. The duration of an S-STEM scholarship is 5 years per degree or institution. What does that mean for students at 2-year colleges?**

Congress authorized NSF to extend the duration of a scholarship to a maximum of 5 years per degree. In theory, a scholar pursuing an associate degree in an eligible discipline could receive a scholarship for that many years. However, other parts of the legislation require students to make progress towards degree attainment to be eligible to receive the scholarship. Therefore, it would be rare that a full-time student takes that long and is still eligible. However, it could happen if a student is attending only part time (50% of full-time enrollment is the minimum to receive a scholarship).