National Science Foundation
4201 Wilson Boulevard
Arlington, Virginia 22230

NSF 10-047

MRI Frequently Asked Questions

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GENERAL

1. **How do I find recent MRI awards to see if my planned submission is in line with other requests made to the program?**

   The NSF Award search page (http://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/tab.do?dispatch=4) can be used to search for MRI awards using "Element Code" 1189.

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.Sci. degrees in all NSF-supported fields during the combined previous two academic years. ***Non-degree-granting organizations*** are organizations that do not award Associate's degrees, Bachelor's degrees, Master's degrees, and/or Ph.D.s or D.Sci.s. Non-degree-granting organizations also include institutions of higher education that award all of their degrees outside of NSF-supported fields.

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 research 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; (Section D.4 of the Grant Proposal Guide provides additional information on collaborative proposals).

   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).

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

4. **Is resubmission of a previous 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 the recent MRI-R2competition (under NSF 09-561) or any prior MRI competition, suitably revised as noted above, are not precluded from the current competition.

5. **If an *organization* has submitted prior proposals or received previous MRI awards, does that make them ineligible to submit a proposal?**

   No, for each competition eligible organizations may submit up to the maximum number of allowable proposals. For each competition, two MRI proposals may be submitted with no restrictions on whether they are acquisition or development proposals. A third proposal from an eligible organization will also be accepted if **at least one of three proposals** is for instrument development.

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

   No, there is no limit on the number of MRI projects in which a PI/Co-PI may participate, but 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. **Does a subaward to an organization count against that organization's proposal submission limit?**

   Inclusion as a subawardee in any **acquisition** proposal must be counted against the proposal submission limits for that organization. An organization may be included as a funded subawardee in another organization's **development** proposal, at a level of 20% or less of that proposal's request for funding from NSF, without affecting the subawardee's submission limit. Inclusion as a funded subawardee in a development proposal at a budgetary level in excess of 20% of the NSF funding request must be counted against proposal submission limits. Note: Cost sharing applies to the portions of a proposal's budget request from NSF that go to organizations that are not exempt from the cost-sharing requirement, even through subawards.

COST SHARING

8. **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.D.s or D.Sci.s in all NSF-supported fields during the combined previous two academic years. Additionally, any organization that has awarded a Ph.D. or D.Sci. in NSF-supported fields during the combined previous two academic years is considered to be a Ph.D.-granting institution if the only degrees it awards in NSF-supported fields are Ph.D.s or D.Sci.s. **Non-degree-granting organizations** are those that do not award Associate's degrees, Bachelor's degrees, Master's degrees, and/or Ph.D.s or D.Sci.s. Non-degree-granting organizations also include institutions of higher education that award all of their degrees outside of NSF-supported fields.

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

   Only non-Ph.D.-granting academic institutions of higher education (accredited colleges and universities 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.Sci. degrees in all NSF-supported fields during the combined previous two academic years) are exempt from the cost-sharing requirement.

10. **What are eligible cost-sharing expenses?**

    Cost sharing must come from 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. A basic rule of thumb is that if you are not able to ask for it in the proposal, it cannot be used as cost sharing. Further information related to cost sharing can be found in OMB Circular A-110, Sub Part C.23 "Cost Sharing or Matching." For additional information on cost principles consult: OMB Circular A-21 (Cost Principles for Educational Institutions) and/or OMB Circular A-122 (Cost Principles for Non-Profit Organizations). Further information about cost-sharing is available from NSF's Cost Analysis and Audit Resolution Branch at http://www.nsf.gov/bfa/dias/caar/index.jsp.

11. **Can a vendor discount count as cost sharing?**

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

12. **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 come from MRI eligible expenses. Room renovations and other categories of expenses that MRI does not support cannot be used as cost sharing.

13. **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.

14. **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 participant in the project 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 their budget. Cost sharing must come from MRI-eligible expenses and cannot come from Federal sources.

15. **My institution is required to cost share, but we have 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). Cost-sharing can come from any participant in the project 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 their budget. Cost sharing must come from MRI-eligible expenses and cannot come from Federal sources.

ELIGIBLE REQUESTS

16. **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 is planned. The instrument request should follow from the planned activities, and the budget should be well-aligned with the scale and scope of the needs. 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 even lower for non-Ph.D.-granting institutions or certain fields called out in the solicitation).

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

Yes. Eligible organizations may submit up to three development MRI proposals if they chose to do so.

18. **Can an instrument development proposal include research and development (R&D) activities which are needed to mature the enabling technologies that will be used for an instrument?**

The MRI program does not support early research and development of enabling technologies for use in a future instrument.   Development proposals should incorporate relatively mature technologies that will lead to a useable, stable instrument for research at the end of the award period.

19. **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 supporting infrastructure and systems such as HVACs, drainage, and power systems.

20. **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 or that is not dedicated to a single instrument is generally considered infrastructure and is not supported by MRI.

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

For the purposes of the MRI program, proposals must be for either acquisition or development of a single instrument or for equipment that, when combined, serves as an integrated research instrument (physical or virtual). In general, for a proposal for multiple pieces of equipment to be consistent with the MRI solicitation, the entirety of the integrated instrumentation should be focused on a specific research question or set of inseparable questions. Reviewers will have to be convinced that the combined instrumentation can be viewed as a single instrument and not a suite of instruments that are needed to outfit a laboratory and/or conduct closely related, but nevertheless independent, research and research training activities.

22. **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). Will this use disqualify the proposal?**

No. The use of the instrument in educational and outreach efforts is encouraged (e.g., a broader impact), but the preponderance of use of the instrument must be research and research training.

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

Yes, but any requests for salary must be consistent with the Grant Proposal Guide

requirements and allowable by the MRI guidelines (i.e., for operations and maintenance during the period of the award or for activities that are directly related to instrument development). Such requests must be well justified, and be commensurate with the technical expertise and time required for the scale and scope of the instrument. Reviewers will be asked to comment on the appropriateness of such requests.

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

Operations and maintenance costs to support a technician, commensurate with the scale and scope of the instrument, are eligible MRI costs during the award period.

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

"Operations and Maintenance" includes only those activities that 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, management of supplies and other consumables, managing the scheduling of users, and completing training from the vendor for the maintenance of the instrument. Operations and maintenance does not include operating the instrument for the purpose of conducting research, training of users to operate the instrument, demonstrating the usefulness of the instrument to interested parties, operation of the instrument for educational or outreach activities, etc.

26. **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 budget request) for any personnel associated with development efforts. While there is no prescribed balance between the funding requested for labor and materials in an development proposal, reviewers will carefully examine the appropriateness of salary requests.

27. **Are training expenses for the instrument eligible costs?**

Training expenses are allowed *only* for personnel who will install and/or maintain the instrument. Expenses associated with the training of users are not allowed.

28. **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.

29. **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.

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

Service contracts during the award period are allowed if justified in the proposal. Proposers may request an award period of up to three years for acquisition proposals.

31. **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.

32. **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 operations and maintenance 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.

33. **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.

REQUIRED DOCUMENTATION

34. **Is a letter certifying an organization's degree-granting status required of every organization listed in a proposal?**

A letter certifying 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, even subawardees. Failure to provide the required certification(s) may be grounds for returning the proposal without review.

35. **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. A mentoring plan for postdoctoral personnel is a requirement of the America COMPETES Act. If a proposal requests funds to support postdoctoral personnel, then a mentoring plan is required. Failure to provide this mentoring plan will result in the proposal being returned without review. For further information on this topic, please consult the Grant Proposal Guide at http://www.nsf.gov/publications/pub_summ.jsp?ods_key=gpg

SUGGESTED DOCUMENTATION

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

Reviewers should know that a participant knows and agrees that he/she will play a role in a project. It is up to the PI to determine how best to convey that information, and to determine which of the project's participants should provide a formal statement of collaboration. Statements of collaboration from every possible user of an instrument, or from minor participants in a project, are not necessary. Note that the format for statements of collaboration is specified in the solicitation. More extensive statements of collaboration or letters endorsing the project will not be accepted.

UNALLOWED DOCUMENTATION

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

No. All allowed documents must be included in the electronic submission (FastLane of

Grants.gov) of the proposal itself. There is no mechanism to accept any documentation outside of the approved electronic submission processes.

38. **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.

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

No. A letter of intent is not required or accepted.

PROPOSAL SUBMISSION

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

The earliest anticipated start date that can be requested is September 15, 2010.

41. **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.

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

No. Proposals submitted after the deadline will not be accepted. The MRI program strongly urges that proposals be submitted well before the deadline, and that PI's check to ensure that the proposal *as submitted* is actually correct in format and content as that which was intended to be submitted. Corrections to proposals can be made by proposal file updates prior to the submission deadline.