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Major Research Instrumentation (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 the MRI "Element Code" 1189. Alternatively, year-by-year lists of MRI awards can be found at <http://www.nsf.gov/od/iaa/programs/mri>.

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 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.

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 sub awards 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).

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 (3)c status and consortia organized specifically to support an MRI project. The latter "MRI consortium" must include at least two MRI submission-eligible organizations, and proposals from a MRI consortium must be submitted by one of its submission-eligible organizations on behalf of the consortium.

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?**

A MRI proposal should 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 to support their role in a collaborative MRI project.

A MRI proposal should be entitled "MRI Consortium" when the proposal is a single proposal submitted by a submission-eligible organization on the behalf of a consortium organized specifically to support the MRI project. Collaborative work in a "MRI Consortium" may be funded only through a sub-award mechanism, but may, in specific cases, include funding for organizations in the consortium that 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, 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 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 competition. 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 new 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 instrumentation obtained from each award.
8. **Does a subaward to an organization count against that organization's proposal submission limit?**
Inclusion as a funded subawardee on any acquisition proposal will be counted against an organization's proposal submission limit.

Inclusion as a funded 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; see also FAQ #18). **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 awards Ph.D. or D.Sci. 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.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.
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 no more than 30% of the total project cost. Inclusion of voluntary committed cost sharing is prohibited and Line M on the proposal budget must only include the mandatory 30% cost-sharing amount.
11. **What resources 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 request funding for it in the proposal, it cannot be used as cost sharing.

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 operations and maintenance of the instrument (during the award period and longer term) 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 instrumentation obtained from 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 related to cost sharing can be found in [2 CFR, Part 215](#) (formerly OMB Circular A-110: Uniform Administrative Requirements for Grants and Other Agreements with Institutions of Higher Education, Hospitals and Other Non-Profit Organizations). For additional information on cost principles consult [2 CFR, Part 220](#) (formerly OMB Circular A-21: Cost Principles for Educational Institutions) and/or [2 CFR, Part 230](#) (formerly OMB Circular A-122: Cost Principles for Non-Profit Organizations). 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>.
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 come from 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 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 (Line M). Cost sharing must come from MRI-eligible expenses and cannot come from Federal sources.
18. **Can you give me an example of how to calculate the amount of required cost-sharing when one or more, but not all, organizations included on a MRI proposal are required to cost share?**
Organization A is submitting a proposal for a MRI project with a total estimated cost of \$1,000,000 that includes costs to be incurred by Organization B and Organization C. Organization B is exempt from cost sharing, while Organizations A and C are required to cost share. In project planning, the total estimated costs of \$1,000,000 have been allocated in the spending plan as \$450,000 by Organization A, \$300,000 by Organization B, and \$250,000 by Organization C. Given this project budget and the fact that Organization B is exempt from cost sharing, the total amount of project cost subject to cost sharing is \$700,000 (\$450,000 + \$250,000). Organization A must commit to \$210,000 (that is, 30% of \$700,000) of cost sharing on Line M of the FastLane budget that it submits. The total amount of funding requested from NSF by Organization A would therefore be \$790,000 for the entire project. Because the cost sharing of \$210,000 required for the project may come from any of the organizations, the amount of funding requested from NSF for each subaward (to Organizations B and C) may be any dollar amount up to the maximum amount of costs estimated for that organization (\$300,000 for Organization B and \$250,000 for Organization C).
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.Sci. 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. 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.

21. 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 (Line M). Cost sharing must come from MRI-eligible expenses and cannot come from Federal sources.

ELIGIBLE REQUESTS

22. 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 research and research training 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 lower for non-Ph.D.-granting institutions or certain research fields called out in the solicitation).

23. 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.

24. 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?

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 useable, stable instrument for research at the end of the award period.

25. 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.

26. 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.

27. **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 (physical or virtual) serves as an integrated research instrument. In general, for a proposal with 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. NSF and/or reviewers have to be convinced that the combined instrumentation can be viewed as a single instrument and not a suite of instruments to outfit a research laboratory/ facility or to conduct closely related, but nevertheless independent, research and research training activities.
28. **Can you give me an example of an appropriate request for equipment that when combined (physical or virtual) 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.
29. **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 is encouraged (e.g., a broader impact), but the preponderance of use of the instrument must be research and research training.
30. **Can I, as a faculty member, request salary support?**
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.
31. **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. Costs for a technician to operate the instrument to obtain research results are not eligible MRI costs.
32. **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, 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 or obtain research results, 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.
33. **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 a development proposal, reviewers will carefully examine the appropriateness of salary requests.
34. **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.
35. **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.

36. 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.

37. 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?

Proposers may request an award period of up to three years for acquisition proposals. Service contracts during the award period are allowed if justified in the proposal. Cost for supplies needed to maintain and calibrate the equipment are allowed if justified in the proposal. Costs for supplies that are consumed during research activities (e.g. reagents, solvents, sample preparation materials) are not MRI eligible expenses.

38. 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.

39. 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.

40. 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.

41. The new 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 requested from NSF or provided as cost sharing in MRI proposals. 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. Costs associated with the implementation of the Data Management Plan should be incremental. Further guidance on appropriate Data Management Plans is provided in FAQ #42.

REQUIRED DOCUMENTATION

42. The new MRI solicitation notes that a 2-page maximum Data Management Plan, or an assertion of the absence of the need for such a Plan, is required to be provided as a supplemental document. What does this entail?

NSF's long standing data policy (see [AAG Chapter VI.D.4](#)) states that investigators are expected to share with other researchers, at no more than incremental cost and within a reasonable time, the primary data, samples, physical collections and other supporting materials created or gathered in the course of work under NSF grants. Examples may include:

- the types of data, samples, physical collections, software, curriculum materials, and other materials to be produced in the course of the project;
- the standards to be used for data and metadata format and content (where existing standards are absent or deemed inadequate, this should be documented along with any proposed solutions or remedies);
- policies for access and sharing including provisions for appropriate protection of privacy, confidentiality, security, intellectual property, or other rights or requirements;

- policies and provisions for re-use, re-distribution, and the production of derivatives; and plans for archiving data, samples, and other research products, and for preservation of access to them.

The Data Management Plan should focus on the approach, or a description of the processes, that will be used to ensure that the investigators share the data with other researchers in accordance with NSF's long standing policy (AAG Chapter VI.D.4)

A valid Data Management Plan may include only the statement that no detailed plan is needed, as long as the statement is accompanied by a clear justification. See [Grant Proposal Guide, Chapter II.C.2.j](#) for further guidance.

43. 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.

44. 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

45. From whom is a statement of collaboration needed?

Reviewers should know that an individual participant knows and agrees that they 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 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

46. 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.

47. 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.

48. Is a letter of intent required?

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

PROPOSALS AND PROPOSAL SUBMISSION

49. **What is the earliest start date that I can request?**
The earliest anticipated start date that can be requested is August 1, after submission.
50. **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.
51. **Is the submission deadline flexible?**
No. Proposals submitted after the deadline will not be accepted. The MRI program strongly recommends 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, 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.