2026 NUCATS Translational Science Research Project Awards
Funding Opportunity Announcement

The Northwestern University Clinical and Translational Sciences Institute (NUCATS) announces this Request for Applications (RFA) for the **2026 NUCATS Translational Science Research Project Awards**.

NUCATS Focus

The NUCATS **Translational Science Research Project Awards** program invites proposals for highly innovative, multidisciplinary pilot projects that advance Translational Science (TS). Details on what qualifies as a TS proposal can be found under "Proposal Eligibility" below.

This year's focus is: **Transforming Health Care Delivery: Innovations for Reach, Access, and Patient Connection**

Despite significant advances in evidence-based care, too many innovations fail to reach the people who need them most. The gap is not limited to effective interventions, but also to the way care is designed, delivered, and communicated. Current systems often rely on rigid formats, clinical language, and complex access pathways that assume time, resources, and health literacy that many individuals do not have. As a result, healthcare innovations tend to disproportionately benefit those who actively seek care and face fewer barriers, while individuals with the greatest needs struggle to access services—whether evidence-based practices are available or not.

This initiative seeks proposals that reimagine how care is designed, offered, accessed, communicated, and delivered and evaluated for impact, with a focus on reach, scalability, and real-world feasibility. We are particularly interested in innovations that improve interventions and how they are delivered, supporting both patients and providers, while addressing gaps in how evidence-based care is identified, communicated, linked, and sustained in practice.

Approaches of interest move beyond traditional care delivery models and may include stepped care, flexible and low-burden formats, and strategies that meet people where they are. Examples include single-session or brief interventions; peer- or lay-provider-delivered supports; digital or text-based tools (e.g., apps, websites, chatbots); navigation or linkage supports; workflow redesign; or other delivery innovations that improve access, uptake, adherence, and continuity of care. Proposals may also focus on equipping clinicians and care teams with better tools, pathways, and communication strategies to help patients understand their options and engage with appropriate services. Proposals addressing earlier stages of translation, such as development of interventions that are home-based, at the point of care, and/or long acting (or otherwise minimizing clinical visits), are also of interest. In any domain, generalizability and scalability to different conditions or settings would be a strength. Each of these aspects contributes to advancing acceleration of translation, in alignment with NUCATS' role as directed by the funder.

An additional topic of interest is building clear, culturally-attuned communication pathways that help individuals understand what services exist, whether they are relevant, and how to access them and make informed healthcare decisions. Proposals should prioritize plain-language communication, simplified pathways, and proactive connection to the right level of care at the right time. Strengthening human connection within care is also critical: when patients and their care partners feel disconnected from clinicians, care teams, or systems, even well-designed interventions may fail to reach those who could benefit most.

While proposals may address a wide range of clinical areas and populations, applications that explore these care delivery challenges in areas with pronounced issues of access, coordination, and communication will be particularly encouraged. Some examples of settings with such issues are rehabilitation and populations with other special needs (such as transplantation, cancer, HIV and its comorbidities). Applications focused on other clinical domains and populations are equally encouraged.

Multi-disciplinary collaboration across teams, departments, and schools at Northwestern is strongly encouraged, particularly where partnerships bring together clinical, research, operational, community, and/or patient-advocacy perspectives to break down "silos." By making care more adaptable, accessible, impactful, culturally responsive, and understandable—for both patients and clinicians—this initiative aims to accelerate the reach of innovation and ensure that evidence-based care benefits a broader and more diverse population.

We intend to fund up to two awards at $250,000-$400,000 total direct costs over two years. If an applicant team plans to propose a smaller budget, please contact NUCATS-funding@northwestern.edu to discuss suitability.

Intent to Apply

To ensure a timely and effective proposal review process, prospective applicants are **asked to express Intent to Apply by Friday, March 13 via this form here.** This information will be used solely for planning purposes, including determining the appropriate scale and disciplinary expertise of the review panel, given the accelerated review timeline. Although submission of Intent to Apply is non-binding and does not obligate submission of a full proposal, timely submission is essential to our ability to conduct an effective review process.

Deadlines and Award Timeline

RFA Issued	February 6, 2026
Proposal Submission Form Opens in Competitions	February 6, 2026
Proposal Submission Deadline[1]	April 10, 2026
Anticipated Notice of Award	May 8, 2026
Protocol Submission to the IRB Deadline for Awarded Grants[2]	May 15, 2026
Target NCATS Prior Approval Documents Due[2]	June 30, 2026
Earliest Anticipated Funding Start Date	August 1, 2026
Funding Period	All funding must be spent within a 24-month period. No-cost extensions are not permitted.

[1] Questions about the suitability of specific study designs for this funding announcement are welcome and may be directed to NUCATS-funding@northwestern.edu

[2]Our funder requires additional documentation prior to the release of funds for research involving human subjects or vertebrate animals. Protocols must be submitted to the IRB by May 15, 2026. Selected applicants will be notified by May 8, so there will be a one-week turnaround to provide the required materials to the IRB. Applicants will be required to cite our grant in your IRB documentation and related publications, and we will need to forward your IRB approval, protocol, and consent form to the NIH for review and approval prior to the commencement of the project. This process typically takes 30–90 days, depending on the complexity of the proposal and the IRB's determination of risk level. These materials will be due to NUCATS by June 30, 2026. **Funds may not be used for any studies that will be categorized as an NIH-defined clinical trial. *Please review the Proposal Eligibility section below*.**

PI Eligibility

Eligible PIs are faculty from Northwestern University (Evanston and Chicago campuses), as well as faculty from NUCATS Institute's clinical affiliate institutions (Northwestern Memorial HealthCare, Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, and/or Shirley Ryan AbilityLab).

- Faculty applicants must be engaged in research and be eligible to apply for subsequent external grant funding as a PI or MPI.
- Faculty applicants must demonstrate prior success in securing funding for projects of this scale or larger.

Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine residents, clinical fellows, and postdoctoral fellows are not eligible to apply as a PI or MPI.

Proposal Eligibility

Our funding agency (NCATS) requires that applications focus on TS to be eligible for this funding mechanism. As above, TS enables improved understanding of a scientific or operational principle underlying a step of the translational process. TS has the goal of developing generalizable principles to accelerate translation of scientific advances into improving health for all (see NCATS overview and Faupel-Badger JM et al., 2022).We define translational research as research that advances scientific discovery for a specific disease, target, or context. By contrast, TS studies the overall process of translation itself, generating broader, disease-agnostic tools, methods, and best practices, with the goal of making research that can improve the health of all humans faster and more efficient. One way to think of the distinction is as follows: translational research studies a specific health-related question, while TS studies the "how to" of translation to improve the entire clinical research enterprise, creating solutions that accelerate one or more steps in translation. If successful, TS yields generalizable knowledge applicable in the future to research that can speed development, adoption and/or impact of new interventions for other diseases, ideally across multiple contexts.

While clinical trials designed to accelerate the assessment of effectiveness and advance knowledge of implementation (e.g., hybrid effectiveness-implementation trials) are excellent examples of TS, other research designs not involving an NIH-defined clinical trial (e.g., mixed-methods data collection; secondary analysis of large datasets; biological assays of archived specimens; cohort studies; observational designs; methods, measure, or tool development) can also advance TS. Questions about the suitability of specific study designs for this funding announcement are welcome and may be directed to NUCATS-funding@northwestern.edu.

For descriptions of application and budget requirements, instructions on submittal via Competitions, information on review criteria, and other important considerations, please see here.

Application Requirements

In the order they are outlined below, applications must compile all requirements into a single PDF and use the following filename convention:
[Submitting/Contact PI's Last Name]-[Submitting/Contact PI's First Name]-NUCATSResearchProject-2026.pdf]
(e.g., DAquila-Richard-NUCATSResearchProject-2026.pdf).

Incomplete proposal submissions will not be considered by the NUCATS TS Research Project Awards Scientific Review Panel.

- **Cover Sheet**: Complete the required cover sheet: https://www.nucats.northwestern.edu/docs/nucats-research-project-coversheet-2026.docx
- **Scientific Research Strategy:** Applicants should address the following: specific aims and associated hypotheses (1 page), project's significance and proposed impact should the project ultimately be successful, analysis plan, expected deliverables (e.g., data, methods, tools, publications), dissemination plan, and downstream funding target(s) (e.g., types of future funding opportunities you might pursue based on the anticipated outcomes of this project). The research strategy may not exceed six (6) pages total (Arial 11-point font, single-spaced). This limit includes a required one-page section for specific aims and hypotheses and all figures and tables. References are excluded from the six-page limit; however, applicants are encouraged to limit references to no more than six (6) additional pages.
- **Budget**: NIH-style budget (including, when applicable, (a) specific line-item estimates from the applicable NU research cores and/or resources or (b) separate budget expenses/amounts for the academic and community MPIs; https://www.nucats.northwestern.edu/docs/nucats-research-project-budget.docx
  - For the total budget requested, please provide a value between $250,000 and $400,000.
  - Note: If the proposed project has secured support for expenses in excess of the maximum budget cap allowed in this request for proposals, the applicant must clearly document guaranteed complementary funding.
- **Budget Justification**: NIH-style budget justification describing all proposed expenses in detail.
- **Biosketch(es)**: NIH-style biosketches for all key personnel (principal investigator, co-investigators, other significant contributors). The new biosketch format, effective January 25, 2026, is preferred; although we follow the NIH guidance of leniency until May 2026 (https://grants.nih.gov/grants-process/write-application/forms-directory/biosketch).
- **Other Support**: NIH-style other support document for all key personnel (principal investigator, co-investigators, other significant contributors).
- **Other Documents**: Formal, detailed cost estimate from a research core, such as the Northwestern Medicine Enterprise Data Warehouse (NMEDW), if utilized.

Budget Requirements

Maximum Funding Level: $400,000 over two years

- Examples of **allowable** expenses:
  - Salary expenses for Northwestern PI, MPI(s), and Co-I(s) (applying NIH salary cap at time of submission)
  - Compensation for community partners to serve as investigators on the proposal, typically paid via Consulting Services Agreements
  - Consultation with Northwestern faculty/staff with quantitative and/or qualitative analysis expertise
  - Computational Cluster Central Processing Unit (CPU) time to run specific analyses
  - Laboratory or hospital tests (e.g., complete blood count (CBC) tests)
  - Participant recruitment stipends
  - Regulatory support from NUCATS
  - Analysis of samples by a Northwestern University or affiliated research core facility (including research cores at the University of Chicago and University of Illinois at Chicago covered by the reciprocation agreement)
  - Design/printing of materials
  - Event expenses
- Examples of **non-allowable** expenses:
  - Consultants, except as noted above
  - Student or temporary employee salary expenses
  - Subcontracts with or payments to other academic institutions or other public/private organizations (beyond clinical affiliate institutions identified above or research cores covered by the reciprocation agreement)
  - Travel
  - Tuition expenses
- **Indirect costs** are not permitted and will not be funded. Applicants with primary appointments at a clinical affiliate institution should confirm the institution's acceptance of these terms prior to submission.
- **Clinical Trials**: NUCATS research funds may not be used for clinical trials under this funding mechanism. This is a strictly enforced limitation by our funding agency at the NIH.
- In addition to other budget items, proposals may request funds for biostatistics/research design or informatics support, D&I consultation, Clinical Research Ethics and Equity Consultation support (select CREC on the request form), or other NUCATS resources.

Application Review Process

Proposals will be reviewed by a multidisciplinary standing review committee comprised of faculty with expertise in TS as well as community partners, all of whom will be required to complete training in equitable review practices.

REVIEW CRITERIA

Ideal proposals will clearly demonstrate the following elements:

- Strong potential to lead to meaningful impact on human health and more generalized study/acceleration of the process of translation, with specification of how the proposal will maintain a high likelihood of translation and/or population health impact for a specific condition as well as plans for broader impact on TS across other health conditions.
- Appropriate infrastructure to support the project (including plans to access NUCATS consultation services for support in areas such as implementation science, community stakeholder engagement, biostatistics, and informatics)
- A feasible timeline to complete all proposed activities within the approved funding period (with the understanding that no-cost extensions are not permitted)
- Clear objectives, feasibility plan, analysis plan, timeline, anticipated results, and outcome measures.

The NUCATS Scientific Review Panel will prioritize proposals led by investigators who have demonstrated prior success in securing funding for projects of this scale or larger.

Important Considerations for Submitting/Contact Principal Investigators (PIs)

Our funding agency does not permit no-cost extension requests for Research Projects. Therefore, applicants should be certain that all proposed activities will be completed during the maximum funding timeframe. Applicants are strongly encouraged to submit proposed projects to the appropriate IRB for review by the application deadline on this RFA. Protocols must be submitted by May 1, 2026. Selected applicants will be notified by April 10, so there will be a three-week turnaround to provide the required materials.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Proposals are reviewed internally and are considered confidential information, not to be disclosed to anyone outside the review process.

QUESTIONS

Questions regarding the application process may be directed to NUCATS-Funding@northwestern.edu.
Questions regarding NUCATS Competitions may be directed to competitions@northwestern.edu.