

## 2026 NUCATS Translational Science Pilot Awards Funding Opportunity Announcement

The Northwestern University Clinical and Translational Sciences (NUCATS) Institute announces this Request for Applications (RFA) for the **2026 NUCATS Translational Science Pilot Awards**. The NUCATS pilot awards are contingent upon the continued funding of an NIH National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS) UM1 award.

### Intention of the NUCATS Translational Science Pilot Awards

**The NUCATS Translational Science Pilot Awards program invites proposals for highly innovative, multidisciplinary pilot projects that advance Translational Science (TS).** Details on what qualifies as a TS proposal, along with a self-assessment tool, can be found under “Proposal Eligibility” below. These awards are intended to support faculty in generating preliminary data for future applications for independent external funding; they are not designed for trainee career development.

**This year, we are prioritizing applications that advance generalizable knowledge by:**

- Leveraging secondary analysis of existing data, and/or
- Creating, adapting, and/or disseminating effective tools, methods, processes, or training paradigms that advance translational science

We anticipate funding **four awards of up to \$50,000 each in direct costs.**

### Deadlines and Award Timeline

RFA Issued	January 22, 2026
Proposal Submission form opens in Competitions	February 15, 2026
Optional Consultations <sup>1</sup>	Available upon request
Proposal Submission Deadline	March 20, 2026
Notice of Award	April 24, 2026
Protocol Submission to the IRB or IACUC Deadline <sup>2</sup>	May 8, 2026 Proposals selected for possible funding that involve human subjects or animal research must obtain IRB or IACUC approval as soon as possible. Funding is contingent upon receiving IRB or IACUC approval by no later than June 15, 2026.
Target NCATS Prior Approval Documents Due <sup>2</sup>	June 15, 2026
Earliest Anticipated Funding Start Date	August 1, 2026
Funding Period	All funding must be spent within 11 months (by July 30, 2026) of the awarded project period. No-cost extensions are not permitted.

<sup>1</sup>Applicants are encouraged (but not required) to request consultations through NUCATS resources prior to submission, if relevant (see Proposal Eligibility section). The request form is available on the [NUCATS website](#).

<sup>2</sup> Because we are interested in advancing TS via secondary data analysis and tool/measure/methods creation, we anticipate that many competitive proposals will not require human subjects or animal research approval. In line with funding agency requirements, protocols involving human subjects or vertebrate animals must be submitted to the IRB or IACUC by May 8, 2026. Applicants will be required to cite our grant in IRB or IACUC documentation, and we will need to forward your IRB or IACUC 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. Funds may not be used for clinical trials beyond phase IIA. Funded projects that involve greater than minimal risk and/or are classified as clinical trials will be required to submit additional documentation as part of the prior approval process.

## PI Eligibility

Eligibility is limited to Northwestern University faculty.

- Faculty applicants must be engaged in research and be eligible to apply for follow-on external grant funding as a PI or MPI.
- Faculty applicants may or may not also hold appointments in one of the NUCATS Institute's clinical affiliate institutions (Northwestern Memorial HealthCare, Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, or Shirley Ryan AbilityLab).

Priority for funding will be given to PIs (or submitting/contact MPIs) who have not yet received an NIH R01-equivalent award.

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

- Such trainees are eligible to have a limited role on a proposal as a co-investigator.
- A fellow may be eligible to apply if a letter stating that a faculty appointment is imminent is provided by their department chair or division chief and uploaded with the full application. In this case, the imminent faculty appointment must become effective during the funding period.

## Proposal Eligibility

Our funding agency (NCATS) requires that pilot projects focus on TS – understanding a scientific or operational principle underlying a step of the translational process with 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 improve the health of all humans faster and with greater efficiency. One way to think of the distinction is that translational research studies a specific health-related question, while TS studies the “how to” of translation to improve the entire clinical research enterprise, creating generalizable knowledge and solutions that improves the care of multiple diseases across multiple contexts.

In line with the TS principle of efficiency and speed, we are especially interested in protocols that harness existing secondary data or that create/adapt, or disseminate tools, models, measures, or methods to advance TS.

**Applications proposing translational research that do not clearly articulate how they advance TS principles are not eligible for funding and will be triaged prior to full peer review.**

Within the application, you will complete a TS self-assessment. However, answering these questions while planning your project may help ensure your proposal addresses a TS research question. The questions are:

1. TS is often conducted within the context of clinical and translational research, but a critical distinction between translational research and TS is that the latter aims to produce knowledge that is generalizable to health conditions beyond the specific focus of the project. In 300 words or fewer, describe how one or more of your specific aims advances a generalizable principle to accelerate translation.
2. Effective TS is characterized by eight scientific and operational TS principles (see [NCATS overview](#)). In 300 words or fewer, describe which and how TS principles are addressed in your proposal.

Preliminary research necessary to establish plans/feasibility for subsequent federal research grant applications can be proposed. Describing plans for a subsequent federal research grant application is encouraged.

For descriptions of application and budget requirements, instructions on submittal via Competitions, information on review criteria, and other important considerations, please see:  
<https://www.nucats.northwestern.edu/research-resources/funding/translational-science-pilot-awards.html>

## 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]-NUCATSPilot-2026.pdf  
(e.g., DAquila-Richard-NUCATSPilot-2026.pdf).

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

- **Cover Sheet:** Complete the required cover sheet ([https://www.nucats.northwestern.edu/docs/nucats-pilot-coversheet\\_2026.docx](https://www.nucats.northwestern.edu/docs/nucats-pilot-coversheet_2026.docx))
- **Scientific Research Strategy:** In 2,000 words or fewer, applicants should address the project's significance, aims and associated hypotheses, analysis plan, impact, deliverables, lack of alternate funding, and plans for future funding. The 2,000-word limit does not include figures or references, although applicants are encouraged to limit the cumulative space for figures and/or references to no more than 2 pages.
  - Applicants are strongly encouraged to provide detailed feasibility and analysis plans.
  - Following NIH guidelines, applications must address how sex as a biological variable will be factored into research designs, analyses, and reporting in vertebrate animal and human studies. Strong justification from the scientific literature, preliminary data, or other relevant considerations must be provided for applications proposing to study only one sex.
  - When describing plans for future funding, include as much specific detail as possible (e.g., intended mechanism and/or targeted RFA).
- **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-pilot-budget.docx>).
  - 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 Common Form biosketches for all key personnel (principal investigator, co-investigators, other significant contributors).
- **Other Support:** NIH Common Form 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.

### **Additional requirements for applicants who do not have prior or current NIH funding:**

- 1-paragraph statement from the applicant's faculty mentor indicating they reviewed the proposal, their support for the proposed pilot project, and their willingness to mentor the applicant throughout the project period.
- Faculty mentor's NIH Common Form biosketch.

Applicants who do not have prior or current NIH funding are required to ask a Feinberg-based faculty mentor to (a) review the full pilot application prior to submission and (b) provide a 1-paragraph statement in the full application indicating their support for the proposed pilot project and willingness to mentor the applicant throughout the project period, if funded. Moreover, applicants are encouraged to choose a mentor early and to name this faculty mentor in their application. Applicants may request up to 2% effort for the mentor in the

application (applying NIH salary cap at time of pilot submission) or use other effort already designated for this specific mentoring responsibility.

Applicants with prior or current NIH funding may choose to engage a faculty mentor as described above but are not required to do so.

## Budget Requirements

### Maximum Funding Level: \$50,000

- Examples of allowable expenses:
  - Salary expenses for Northwestern PI, MPI(s), and Co-I(s) (applying NIH salary cap at time of pilot submission)
  - Salary expenses for the lead PI's Northwestern faculty mentor (up to 2% effort, applying NIH salary cap at time of pilot 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
  - Participant recruitment
  - 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:
  - 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:** 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.
- **Trial Phase:** Pilot research funds may not be used for clinical trials beyond phase IIA. 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 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, 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.
- A concept that is too preliminary to qualify for federal funding programs and for which supporting preliminary data would greatly enhance the likelihood of receiving a subsequent NIH-funded award.

- Appropriate infrastructure to support the project (including plans to access NUCATS consultation services for support in areas such as D&I, 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.
- A plan to apply to NIH for follow-on funding upon completion of the pilot project with as much detail as possible; identifying a specific NIH FOA to which there will be a response by a specific submission date is strongly encouraged.

The NUCATS Pilot Scientific Review Panel will prioritize proposals led by early-career faculty (Instructor and Assistant Professor ranks, regardless of track) who have not yet established a significant funding base (PI or MPI on an NIH R01-equivalent award). The lead principal investigator (PI) is the submitting/contact PI. Proposals led by junior faculty that include significant contributions from one or more senior faculty collaborators will be prioritized as well if the junior faculty member is not yet PI on an NIH grant and is planning future federal proposals.

### **Important Considerations for Submitting/Contact Principal Investigators (PIs)**

Our funding agency does not permit no-cost extension requests for pilot awards. Therefore, applicants should be certain that all proposed activities will be completed during the maximum funding timeframe. Projects selected for potential funding that involve human subjects or animal research are required to submit protocols to the appropriate IRB/IACUC for review by May 8 and must have approval no later than June 15, 2026.

### **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](mailto:NUCATS-Funding@northwestern.edu).  
Questions regarding NUCATS Competitions may be directed to [competitions@northwestern.edu](mailto:competitions@northwestern.edu).