



Graduate Fellowship Program Request for Applications

Purpose and Overview

The Medical College of Wisconsin Cancer Center Fellowship Program is designed to train exceptional cancer scientists. The goal is to recruit and train the next generation of leaders in cancer research. Applications from basic, clinical or population sciences are welcome. This prestigious program funds fellowships for both pre- and post-doctoral trainees. This RFA is for Graduate (PhD student) fellows.

The MCW Cancer Center Graduate Fellowship provides research fellowships to support the development of highly promising and accomplished PhD trainees with the potential to become independent cancer research scientists. Due to the complexity of cancer, finding ways to prevent and cure this disease requires a multidisciplinary effort. Therefore, doctoral students in any discipline at MCW with an interest in cancer research are encouraged to apply. The MCW Graduate Fellowship will provide up to two years of support, providing an opportunity for the most promising students to become more immersed in cancer research. The fellowship award supports the fellow's stipend and health insurance. Stipends are determined using MCW Graduate School stipend amount.

Eligibility and Evaluation Criteria

Eligibility

- Proposed research must be cancer relevant; cancer relevance is evaluated by the Program Directors in the Letter of Intent.
- Applicants must have an identified mentor at the Medical College of Wisconsin or Versiti. The faculty mentor is not required to be a member of the Cancer Center.
- Mentor must commit \$5,000 in matching funds from either the mentor or their department. These funds can be used for attendance at national or international meetings, education, or a computer/accessories consistent with MCW policies.
- US citizenship or permanent residency is not necessary, but the applicant must hold a valid U.S. Visa.
- Applicants may receive the MCW Fellowship award only once.
- Applicants may only apply twice. If a resubmission, a one-page response to previous critiques is required.
- Only two applications/cycle are allowed from a single research group, with only one application per category (i.e. one postdoctoral fellow, one predoctoral fellow). The affiliation of the application is defined by the PI whose funds provide stipend support.
- A single research group can only hold one active MCW CC fellowship award per category (a maximum of one active award for a predoctoral fellow and a second active award for a postdoctoral fellow).
- While applicants can apply prior to qualifying exam, if successful, they must have passed their qualifying exam prior to the start of funding.
- Graduate students who obtain extramural support while holding an MCW CC fellowship will be

allowed to defer any remaining funds till after their extramural support ends, allowing them to extend the period they are funded.

Letter of Intent (LOI) Instructions

- Letter of Intent (LOI): LOI with the trainee's name, the mentor's name and affiliations, short summary of the proposed research (up to 500 words), and a paragraph justifying cancer relevance of the proposed research (up to 300 words) is required for all applicants, including for a previously submitted application. Applications which are submitted without having submitted an LOI on-time will be sent back to the PI without review.
- LOIs will be reviewed by Program Directors for applicant and mentor eligibility and to verify cancer relevance. Approval of the LOI for the full application submission or requests for additional information will be communicated to the applicant and mentor within a week of LOI receipt.

Evaluation Criteria

Applications will be assigned to a minimum of two reviewers. These reviewers will score applications based on the standard NIH criteria for fellowships.

- Applicant strengths and research potential.
- For senior mentors, their track record of training will be evaluated. For more junior mentors, potential as a mentor will be considered. All mentors will be judged by their commitment to the career of the trainee and planned training experience as documented in their Sponsor Statement (see below).
- Significance, innovation, impact, and approach of the project.

Application Instructions

- **Application Format:** Use standard 11-point font, single space, and half-inch margins throughout the application. Consecutively number all pages.
- **Cover Page:** Completed through online application portal at <https://redcap.link/h7h5ih7m>. To minimize duplicate cover pages, please ensure project details are finalized before submitting.
- **Career Development Plan (1-page limit).** This section is to be primarily written by the applicant with some direction from the mentor and should reflect career plans and aspirations after the completion of training, including the steps that the applicant plans to take and timeline of such steps to support the transition to the desired next career step. The career development plan should include training in cancer biology, oncology, or some exposure that will enhance the PI's understanding of cancer
- **Response to Prior Critiques** (for resubmissions only; 1-page limit): Please provide a response to reviewer critiques from your prior submission of this proposal. Make sure that the changes to the research plan discussed in the response are marked by vertical lines in the margin of the revised document.
- **Project Summary** (350-word limit): The project summary should include an abstract summarizing the proposed project, including the overall goal, methodology, and significance. A description of how your goals and proposed project will impact cancer research or treatment should also be included.
- **Specific Aims** (1-page limit): State concisely the hypothesis to be tested and the specific aims to be achieved during the two-year award period.
- **Research Strategy** (5-page limit, excluding literature cited):
 - Significance: Describe the scientific premise for the proposal, including relevant background and scientific rationale for the project.
 - Impact/Innovation: Briefly describe how your goals and the proposed project will

impact cancer research or cancer treatment.

- Approach: Describe how the research will be carried out. Include preliminary data that support the project, a description of methods and analyses to be used, and discussion of potential pitfalls and alternative strategies.
- Cancer relevance: Describe how the proposed studies are relevant to cancer.
- **Experimental Details** (optional, 1 page maximum): This extra space is limited to description of uncommon and/or complex experimental systems, data analyses approaches, clinical or population studies protocols, etc. Additional preliminary data in this section has to be directly relevant to the feasibility of experimental approaches described here. The optional extra space should not be used for additional preliminary data that could not fit within the 3-page limit of the Research Strategy section. This section should be considered as a “detailed Materials and Methods” section of the manuscript-reading it should not be required to understand the proposal, or the proposed experiments. Reviewers will be instructed to reflect negatively in their critiques if they believe this section was used to present information which should have been presented in Research Strategy.
- **Literature Cited:** List only references pertinent to the proposed research. References do not count against the page limit.
- **Statistical Plan** (1/2-page limit): Identify aspects of the proposal that will require statistical evaluation and briefly explain why. Describe your plan for developing an appropriate analysis in the event funding is received. For assistance, consult the cancer center biostatistical service or alternative collaborator if needed.
- **Proposal Contributions** (200 words): Proposals should represent the original work of the student with appropriate but limited guidance from the mentor. Briefly describe the relative contributions made by the student, mentor, and any other individuals to the conceptual design, writing and revision of this proposal.
- **Letters of Support (if needed):** Letters from collaborators to state the specific activities that the collaborator and their group will contribute to the training of the applicant and feasibility of the proposal. These are distinct from Letters of Recommendation or Sponsor Statement (see below).
- **NIH Biosketch** (5-page limit for each): Submit one biosketch for the fellow and one for the mentor, both in the NIH format. If the applicant is co-mentored, biosketches of all mentors should be included.
- **Letters of Recommendation:** Letters should be submitted in confidentiality to mewcc-crtec@mew.edu with a subject line "Predoctoral Fellowship: 'applicant name' Letter of Recommendation." Two letters of recommendation are required. One is embedded within the sponsor's statement (see below) and one other are required.
- **Sponsor's Statement (limit to 3 pages) should include:**
 - Mentor's training record and scientific expertise.
 - A list of previous trainees' current positions in tabular form (name, pre- or post-doctoral, dates of training period, current position). Limit to 10 trainees, state the number of total trainees if more than 10.
 - Specific training plans for the student's development as a cancer scientist. Please do not directly repeat details provided within the applicant's career development plan.
 - An evaluation of the student's potential as a cancer scientist.
 - The letter from the doctoral mentor must include a statement committing \$5,000 in matching funds from either the mentor or their department.
 - A stated commitment that the \$5,000 in matching funds will continue to be provided if the fellow successfully obtains an extramural fellowship.
 - If the PI is supervised by two or more primary mentors, elements of all mentors should be included above, and the sponsor's statement should be signed by all mentors.

Timeline

- RFA will be announced on **December 1, 2025**.
- Letter of Intent (LOI): LOI with the trainee's name, the mentor's name and affiliations, short summary of the proposed research, and a paragraph (up to 300 words) justifying cancer relevance of the proposed research is due by **January 12, 2026**. LOIs will be reviewed for applicant and mentor eligibility and to verify cancer relevance. Approval of the LOI for the full application submission or requests for additional information will be communicated to the applicant and mentor within a week of LOI receipt.
- Complete applications, including letters, are due by 5:00 p.m. on **February 16, 2026**.
- Notification of awards on **April 27, 2026**.
- Funding starts **July 1, 2026**.
- Questions about the RFA, guidelines, eligibility and other pre-award and post-award matters should be addressed to mcwcc-crtec@mcw.edu
- Other questions regarding application reviews or funding decisions should be addressed to Vera Tarakanova and Pradeep Chaluvaly-Raghavan (vera@mcw.edu, pchaluvally@mcw.edu).

Program Expectations

- Funding for Year 2 of the fellowship is contingent on meeting all of the following requirements:
A. Year 1 progress report documenting significant research progress to qualify for second year of funding. Significant documented progress is also expected for fellows eligible to reinstate the portion of their MCW award deferred due to receipt of external funding. Progress report will be evaluated by the directors and at least one study section reviewer. **B.** Submission of at least one application for extramural individual predoctoral fellowship or career/transition award (NIH, NSF, ACS, other private foundations) where the trainee is the sole Principal Investigator, with date of submission and outcomes, if any, documented. **C.** Description of career development activities and mentoring of the fellow that occurred since the start of the award, including how the additional \$5,000 supplied by the mentor has been used to advance the trainee's career, evaluated by the directors. **D.** Participation by the PI and Mentor(s) in MCW Cancer Center Events including the Trainee Symposium, Audacity bicycle fundraiser, and the MCW Fellowship Review Panel.
- Publication of original, peer-reviewed research.
- MCW trainee database information entered or updated for trainee.
- Final progress report summarizing project results, resulting publications, and grant applications submitted and planned.
- Fellow and mentor will be asked to participate in MCW Cancer Center sponsored philanthropic endeavors.
- The PI's mentor(s) are expected to participate in the review of MCW Cancer Center fellowship applications for a minimum of two years following the start of the PI's support. Failure to participate in review will be considered negatively when reviewing funding for Year 2 or future applications from the mentor's research group.