

THE NSF 2026 IDEA MACHINE *Handbook*



Help create the Big Ideas of the future



National Science Foundation

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WHAT IS THE NSF 2026 IDEA MACHINE?

- A mechanism to set the stage for breakthrough research in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and STEM education through the nation's 250th anniversary in 2026 and beyond;
- A competition to inform the U.S. agenda for fundamental science, engineering, and STEM education research by proposing new "Big Ideas" for future investment by the National Science Foundation (NSF); and
- An opportunity to contribute to NSF's mission to support basic research that drives the nation's economy, enhances its security, and advances knowledge to sustain U.S. global leadership in science and engineering.

WHAT IS A "BIG IDEA"?

- A Big Idea is a compelling research challenge in fundamental STEM or STEM education that is large in scope, innovative in character, and requires a long-term commitment (i.e., 10 years or more) to address.
- It has (a) worthwhile objective(s), is ambitious and challenging, and may require a paradigm shift in our thinking.
- It requires high risk/high reward, transformative exploration at the frontiers of research in science, engineering, and STEM learning.
- It will attract creative contributions from many researchers.
- It crosses traditional scientific boundaries, fills recognized gaps, or takes advantage of new opportunities, and it does not fit within the current programs of any particular NSF directorate or division.
- Progress toward addressing it would have significant societal and scientific impact that would benefit many stakeholders, both inside and outside the research community.
- Some of the other research Big Ideas that NSF is currently pursuing are [*Harnessing the Data Revolution*](#), [*Understanding the Rules of Life: Predicting Phenotype*](#), [*The Future of Work at the Human-Technology Frontier*](#), [*Navigating the New Arctic*](#), [*Windows on the Universe: The Era of Multi-Messenger Astrophysics*](#), and [*The Quantum Leap: Leading the Next Quantum Revolution*](#).

HOW DOES THE NSF 2026 IDEA MACHINE WORK?

The NSF 2026 Idea Machine has four stages: 1) Big Idea Development and Submission; 2) Video Pitches and Public Comment; 3) Blue-Ribbon Panel Virtual Interviews; and 4) Selection of Winners and Awarding of Prizes.

- Stage 1: Big Idea Development and Submission
 - ❖ **Deadline:** Submit your entry at the [NSF 2026 Idea Machine website](#) by **October 26, 2018**. You will need to provide some basic information about yourself and describe your idea by filling out a narrative response template (see "How to Enter").

- ❖ Individuals or teams of up to five may enter. One member of each team must be designated as the team leader. Teachers may enter on behalf of their high-school classes.
 - ❖ Your Big Idea may be on any topic that fits within the fundamental STEM research and education research mission of NSF. See “What is a Big Idea?” for additional information.
 - ❖ NSF encourages submission of ideas that are amenable to inter-agency, international, or public-private partnerships.
 - ❖ Science, engineering, and STEM education experts will judge the entries and select up to approximately 30 Big Ideas to move on to Stage 2, Video Pitches and Public Comment.
- Stage 2: Video Pitches and Public Comment
- ❖ Contestants whose entries are selected for Stage 2 will be invited to elaborate on their Big Ideas through the submission of brief visual presentations. NSF may suggest that authors of essentially identical ideas work together on the video pitches and subsequent competition stages.
 - ❖ Video pitches may be live-action videos or narrated slide shows up to 10 minutes in length.
 - ❖ In the video pitches you should:
 - elaborate on your compelling research challenge (Big Idea);
 - explain why the challenge is important and what success in addressing it would look like; and
 - suggest illustrative research questions and approaches to address the challenge.
 - ❖ Your video pitch should convey wonder and excitement and aim to inspire the viewer.
 - ❖ Additional instructions on preparing the video pitches will be distributed when Stage 2 entries have been identified.
 - ❖ The video pitches and their original narrative entries will be posted on the NSF 2026 Idea Machine website. The public will be asked to comment on the importance and potential impact of the ideas and encouraged to offer suggestions for improving the ideas.
- Stage 3: Blue-Ribbon Panel Virtual Interviews
- ❖ A Blue-Ribbon Panel of external science, engineering, and STEM education experts will judge the Stage 2 entries, review relevant public comments, and select up to 12 Big Ideas to invite for virtual interviews (to be conducted by videoconference).
 - ❖ During the interviews, entrants will be asked questions by the Panel, providing an opportunity for entrants to explain in additional detail why their proposed Big Ideas are important, what success in addressing the challenge will look like, who will benefit from that success, and why this is the right time for NSF to invest in this Big Idea.
 - ❖ The Blue-Ribbon Panel may pose additional questions based on their review of the materials.
 - ❖ After the interviews, the Panel will recommend up to approximately six Big Ideas for final consideration by NSF.
- Stage 4: Selection of Winners and Awarding of Prizes
- ❖ NSF leadership will select up to approximately four winning Big Ideas.
 - ❖ Winners will be announced publicly and prizes will be awarded.

WHY ENTER?

The NSF 2026 Idea Machine is an unprecedented opportunity to promote a new area of research that is important and exciting but not currently addressed by NSF. It is also a chance to participate in a crucial visioning exercise to identify future research priorities at the national level, and help define critical, new, long-term research directions that promote the progress of science.

Cash Prizes! Public Recognition!

- Grand prize: Each final winning entry will receive a cash prize of **\$26,000** and its authors (individuals or teams) will be invited to a recognition event in the Washington, D.C. area.
 - ❖ If the winning entry was submitted by a team, the cash prize will go to the team leader, who will be responsible for sharing the prize with other team members.
 - ❖ If the winning entry resulted from a formal collaboration during stages 2 and 3 among the authors of multiple original, essentially identical entries, the cash prize will be divided among the authors / team leaders of the multiple original entries.
- Each of the entries recommended by the Blue-Ribbon Panel for final consideration by NSF (approximately six) will receive an honorable mention at the winner recognition event.
- Each author (individual or team member) of the entries selected by the Blue-Ribbon Panel for virtual interviews (approximately 12) will receive a cash prize of **\$1,000**.
- All authors (individual and teams) of each of the entries invited to submit video pitches (approximately 30) will receive thank-you letters from NSF leadership.
- The authors of the top, approximately 100 entries will receive public recognition by having their Ideas posted on the Idea Machine website.

HOW TO ENTER

Submit your entry at the [NSF 2026 Idea Machine website](#) by **October 26th, 2018**. You must provide the following information for your entry:

- Title of your Big Idea;
- Each author's name, occupation, affiliation / place of employment (if applicable), city, state, and country of residence, and email address. For team entries, the first name listed should be that of the team leader;
- Scientific, engineering, or STEM education research interests or areas of expertise of the author(s);
- Narrative (up to 10,000 characters, including punctuation and white-space) that addresses the following questions:
 - ❖ What is the compelling question or challenge?
 - ❖ What do we know now about this Big Idea and what are the key research questions we need to address?
 - ❖ Why does it matter? What scientific discoveries, innovations, and desired societal outcomes might result from investment in this area?
 - ❖ If we invest in this area, what would success look like?
 - ❖ Why is this the right time to invest in this area?
- Up to three key words describing the Big Idea;

- Consent to NSF's use and display of the submitted information and contestants' names and likenesses;
- Confirmation that all individual and team entrants meet the age, and citizenship / residence requirements as described in the eligibility criteria; and
- A signed parent / guardian permission form for entrants younger than 18 years of age.
- A checkbox will be available for teachers to indicate that they are submitting an entry on behalf of their high-school classes.

JUDGING CRITERIA

The initial screening of all entries will use the following criteria:

- Does the idea fit within the purview of NSF, as described in the NSF [Proposal and Awards Policies & Procedures Guide \(PAPPG\)](#)¹?
- Is the idea scientifically credible?
- Is the idea sufficiently ambitious in scope to be deemed a Big Idea?
- Is it a research theme, and not an individual project?
- Does it cross traditional scientific boundaries?

Entries that meet the initial screening criteria will then be judged using the following criteria:

- Potential societal and scientific impacts of addressing the challenge;
- Excitement generated by the challenge;
- Ambition and scope of the challenge;
- Originality of the challenge;
- Potential for inter-agency, international, and public-private partnerships to address the challenge;
- Timeliness of the challenge;
- Whether the challenge is beyond the scope of existing NSF programs; and
- Quality of the presentation of the entry (initial narrative; video pitch; remote interviews, as appropriate for the competition stage).

The final selection of winning entries will be at the discretion of NSF and will include consideration of additional factors such as the Foundation's current and planned investments, the unique suitability of

¹ From the PAPPG: NSF funds research and education in most fields of science and engineering. NSF does not normally support technical assistance, pilot plant efforts, research requiring security classification, the development of products for commercial marketing, or market research for a particular project or invention. Research with disease-related goals, including work on the etiology, diagnosis or treatment of physical or mental disease, abnormality, or malfunction in human beings or animals, is normally not supported. Animal models of such conditions or the development or testing of drugs or other procedures for their treatment also are not eligible for support. However, research in bioengineering, with diagnosis- or treatment-related goals, that applies engineering principles to problems in biology and medicine while advancing engineering knowledge is eligible for support. Bioengineering research to aid persons with disabilities also is eligible. NSF does not have any programs involving the construction of public works in metropolitan areas, no development assistance programs, no programs requiring State plans as a condition of assistance, none involving coordination of planning in multi-jurisdictional areas and no programs of grants to State and local governments as defined in Section 6501(4) of Title 31 of the United States Code (USC).

NSF to lead research activities on the proposed Big Idea, risk / reward balance of investing in the idea, readiness of the relevant research communities to take on the idea, and the scope and scale of the idea.

ELIGIBILITY

- All contestants (including individual entrants and all team members) **must be at least 14 years of age** on September 1, 2018, and be:
 - ❖ U.S. citizens or permanent residents, or
 - ❖ Residing legally in the U.S. on September 1, 2018.
- Only one entry per individual or team is permitted.
 - ❖ A contestant may submit an entry as an individual or as a member of a team, but not both.
 - ❖ A contestant may only be on at most one team.
- Entries are welcomed from amateurs and professionals alike.
- High-school teachers are encouraged to enter on behalf of their classes.
- Entries may be submitted by individuals or by teams comprised of up to five individuals, one of whom must be designated as the team leader.

The following individuals are *not* eligible to participate in this contest:

- Employees of NSF, including but not limited to those with career, temporary, term, or VSEE (Visiting Scientist, Engineer, and Educator) appointments;
- NSF contractors;
- Fellowship holders working at NSF, e.g., NSF/American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Science and Technology Policy Fellows and Einstein Fellows;
- Others working at NSF, e.g., Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) assignees;
- Idea Machine judges;
- Family members of, persons living in the same household as, and anyone who has a financial relationship with: employees of NSF (including but not limited to those with career, temporary, term, or VSEE appointments), NSF contractors, Fellowship holders working at NSF, others working at NSF (e.g. IPAs), and Idea Machine judges; and
- Federal employees working within the scope of their employment.

Federal grantees and contractors may not use federal funds to develop entries for this contest.

RULES

- All entries must be received by 11:59 p.m. EST on October 26, 2018.
- An Idea Machine entry constitutes an agreement to adhere to the rules and stipulations set forth by the contest sponsor, NSF.
- Entrants must meet the eligibility requirements described in the Eligibility section.
- Any entrant or entry found in violation of any rule will be disqualified.
- Entries must not advertise or promote a commercial product visually or orally.
- Each individual or team entrant certifies, through submission to the contest, that the entry is his / her own original, creative work and does not violate or infringe upon the creative work of others, as protected under applicable intellectual property law.

- By entering the contest, the entrants agree to hold NSF harmless from all legal and administrative claims to include associated expenses that may arise from any claims related to their submission or its use.
- All Idea Machine judges' and NSF's decisions are final and may not be appealed.
- Entrants retain all copyright and equivalent rights but give NSF nonexclusive rights to use their names, likenesses, quotes, submissions or any part of their submission for educational, publicity, and/or promotional purposes. This includes, but is not limited to, website display, print materials, and exhibits.
- NSF will not be responsible for any claims or complaints from third parties about any disputes of ownership regarding the ideas, images, or videos included in entries or public comments.
- Winners are responsible for all taxes or other fees connected with the prize received and/or travel paid for by the sponsoring organization.
- NSF reserves the right for any reason, including but not limited to an insufficient number of qualified entries, to modify or cancel the competition at any time during the duration of the competition.
- Should NSF decide to bring winning contestants to the Washington, D.C. area, or to any other location for promotional and other purposes, expenses paid by NSF will be within the limits set forth in law according to federal travel regulations.
- All contestants agree that they, their heirs and estates shall hold harmless the United States, the employees of the federal government, including all employees of NSF for any and all injuries and / or claims arising from participation in this contest, to include that which may occur while traveling to or participating in contest activities.
- NSF has the final say on any point not outlined in the entry rules.
- NSF, at its sole discretion, shall determine eligibility of any contestant or team, and may disqualify anyone at any time for any reason.

TIMELINE

The tentative schedule for the NSF 2026 Idea Machine is shown below. All dates are approximate. NSF reserves the right to shift dates, and to add or remove steps as necessary.

NSF 2026 Idea Machine Step	Approximate Dates
Competition entries accepted	August 31 - October 26, 2018
Entries screened/judged by NSF staff	October 26, 2018 – January 10, 2019
Video pitches invited	January 10 – 15, 2019
Video pitches and narratives posted online for public comment	February 15 - March 15, 2019
Blue-Ribbon Panel judging and virtual interviews	March 15 – May 15, 2019
NSF selection of winning entries	May 25 - June 15, 2019
Winners announced and prizes awarded	August, 2019

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is NSF 2026?

- A. [NSF 2026](#), one of the National Science Foundation's [10 Big Ideas](#), will invest in bold, foundational research questions that are large in scope, innovative in character, originate outside of any particular NSF directorate, and require a long-term commitment. This Big Idea is framed around the year 2026, the Nation's 250th anniversary. NSF 2026 will ensure continuous exploration at the frontiers of science and engineering and encourage risk-taking in areas that might not fit inside the "box" of any particular NSF program. Its investments will cross boundaries in innovative ways, fill recognized gaps in our knowledge, and take advantage of new opportunities.

What is the NSF 2026 Idea Machine?

- A. The NSF 2026 Idea Machine is a contest through which NSF seeks input on grand challenges or questions (i.e., Big Ideas) to inform its long-term planning. The contest invites the public and the scientific community to participate by submitting ideas and by commenting on other contestants' ideas. The entries will be judged by STEM and STEM education research experts at multiple stages of the contest. In the end, NSF will award cash and other prizes for the best entries.

Why did NSF create the NSF 2026 Idea Machine?

- A. In the nearly 70 years since it was founded, NSF has played a critical role in establishing U.S. leadership in fundamental STEM research and education, advancing knowledge and creating innovations that drive the nation's economy and enhance its security, and in training the next generation of scientists and engineers. As we look to the future, we must envision research directions that will drive NSF's long-term research agenda – ideas that will ensure future generations continue to reap the benefits of fundamental STEM and STEM education research. The NSF 2026 Idea Machine is NSF's way of asking the public and research community for input on the nation's long-term research agenda. NSF's original set of [10 Big Ideas](#) announced in 2016 was generated by NSF staff based on ideas from the research community. For the next set of Big Ideas, NSF wants to hear from all interested stakeholders – including the general public – about the most important and potentially transformative basic research questions.

Who is eligible to enter the NSF 2026 Idea Machine?

- A. Entries may be submitted by individuals or teams. Contestants (individuals and all team members) must be at least 14 years of age on September 1, 2018. U.S. citizens and permanent residents are eligible to enter; individuals who are not U.S. citizens or permanent residents are eligible to enter only if they legally reside in a U.S. state or territory on September 1, 2018.

Who is not eligible to enter the NSF 2026 Idea Machine?

- A. The following individuals are *not* eligible to participate in this contest:
- Employees of NSF, including but not limited to those with career, temporary, term, or VSEE (Visiting Scientist, Engineer, and Educator) appointments;
 - NSF contractors;
 - Fellowship holders working at NSF, e.g., NSF/American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Science and Technology Policy Fellows and Einstein Fellows;
 - Others working at NSF, e.g., Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) assignees;
 - Idea Machine judges;
 - Family members of, persons living in the same household as, and anyone who has a financial relationship with employees of NSF (including but not limited to those with career, temporary, term, or VSEE appointments), NSF contractors, Fellowship holders working at NSF, others working at NSF (e.g. IPAs), and Idea Machine judges; and
 - Federal employees working within the scope of their employment.

Why should I enter?

- A. By submitting an entry, you can promote a new area of research that is important and exciting to you but not currently addressed by NSF. Submitting an entry allows you to participate in a crucial visioning and planning exercise to help in the selection of NSF's future directions for research funding at the national level. By participating in the NSF 2026 Idea Machine, you can help define critical, new, long-term research directions that promote scientific progress, and in the process, may earn cash prizes and public recognition.

Can I submit an entry as an individual?

- A. Yes. Entries may be submitted by individuals or by teams, but teams are limited to five members, one of whom must be designated as the team leader.

Can I submit more than one entry?

- A. No. Each contestant or team may submit only one entry. A contestant may submit an entry as an individual or as a member of a team, but not both. A contestant may only be on one team. Any entrant or entry found in violation of any rule will be disqualified.

Where can I learn more about the research the NSF is already funding?

- A. To find out more information about the research that NSF is funding, please check [here](#). Also see [NSF's 10 Big Ideas](#). With this contest we are looking to you (the public, research community, and other interested stakeholders) to help generate NSF's next set of Big Ideas.

I am not a scientist, engineer, or an educator. Can I still submit an entry?

- A. Yes! We encourage everyone to submit an entry. However, in order to enter, you must be at least 14 years of age on September 1, 2018.

Will I be required to perform experiments?

- A. No, you will not be required to perform experiments. NSF is looking for ideas or themes that can be used to guide its future long-term research agenda. It is not looking for current or future individual research projects.

What will NSF do with the Big Ideas it receives through this competition?

- A. The ideas gathered through the NSF 2026 Idea Machine will be used to inform NSF's long-term planning for future investments. The Big Ideas proposed may be modified or combined by NSF staff and used to shape future NSF funding opportunities.

What science, engineering and STEM education topics is the NSF looking for in the submitted entries?

- A. The STEM research and education topics the NSF is looking for should fall within the purview of the Foundation's work, found [here](#). However, with this contest we are looking for thematic challenges / foundational research themes that will not easily fit into NSF's [existing programs](#), but rather, go beyond them.

Are there science, engineering, and STEM education topics that should be avoided?

- A. Yes. The topics and ideas that should be avoided are those that fit within NSF's [existing programs](#) and those that are not within the purview of NSF, as described in the [Proposal & Award Policies and Procedures Guide \(PAPPG\)](#). For example, NSF does not normally support technical assistance, pilot plant efforts, research requiring security classification, the development of products for commercial marketing, or market research for a particular project or invention. Research with disease-related goals, including work on the etiology, diagnosis or treatment of physical or mental disease, abnormality, or malfunction in human beings or animals, is normally not supported. Animal models of such conditions or the development or testing of drugs or other procedures for their treatment also are not eligible for support. However, research in bioengineering, with diagnosis- or treatment-related goals, that applies engineering principles to problems in biology and medicine while advancing engineering knowledge is eligible for support. Bioengineering research to aid persons with disabilities also is eligible. NSF does not have any programs involving the construction of public works in metropolitan areas, no development assistance programs, no programs requiring State plans as a condition of assistance, none involving coordination of planning in multi-jurisdictional areas and no programs of grants to State and local governments as defined in Section 6501(4) of Title 31 of the United States Code (USC).

Do I need to include references or citations to other work in my entry?

- A. No. Not having references will not hurt your chance of having your idea selected. However, if there are potential citations to other work that would support the scientific credibility of your idea, its importance, or its feasibility, then it may be beneficial to include them on your entry form.

What happens after I enter?

A. You will receive confirmation of your initial entry at the time of submission. If you fail to receive a confirmation email, please send an email to NSF2026IM@nsf.gov with the subject line "NSF 2026 Entry Confirmation Failed".

How will I know if my entry moves to the next round?

A. You will be contacted by a NSF representative via email and receive additional instructions if your entry is chosen to move to the next round.

Can I withdraw my entry after submission?

A. If you would like to withdraw your entry, please send an email to NSF2026IM@nsf.gov with the subject line, "Withdrawal". In the case of team entries, all authors must consent to withdrawal.

What are the requirements for the video pitches?

- A. For those contestants whose entries are selected for Stage 2, video pitches may be live-action videos or narrated slide shows up to 10 minutes in length. In the video pitches you will be expected to:
- elaborate on your compelling challenge;
 - explain why the challenge is important and what success in addressing it would look like;
 - suggest illustrative research questions and approaches to address the challenge; and
 - convey wonder and excitement and aim to inspire the viewer.

Additional instructions on preparing the video pitches will be distributed when Stage 2 entries have been identified.

Who will judge the entries?

A. In the earlier stages, the entries will be judged by NSF staff. In the later stages, the entries will be judged by NSF staff with the advice of a Blue-Ribbon Panel composed of STEM research and education research experts.

What will entries be judged on?

- A. All entries will initially be screened using the following criteria:
- Does the proposed idea fit within the purview of NSF, as described in the [PAPPG](#)?
 - Is the proposed idea scientifically credible?
 - Is the proposed idea sufficiently ambitious in scope to be deemed a Big Idea?
 - Is it a theme, rather than an individual project?
 - Does the proposed idea cross traditional scientific boundaries?

Entries that meet the initial screening criteria will be judged using the following criteria:

- Potential societal and scientific impacts of addressing the challenge;
- Excitement generated by the challenge;
- Originality of the challenge;

- Potential for inter-agency, international, or public-private partnerships to address the challenge;
- Timeliness of the challenge;
- Whether the challenge is beyond the scope of existing NSF programs; and
- Quality of the presentation of the entry (initial narrative; video pitch; remote interviews).

The final selection of winning entries will be at the discretion of NSF and will include consideration of additional factors such as the Foundation's current and planned investments, the unique suitability of NSF to lead research activities on the proposed Big Idea, readiness of the relevant research communities to take on the idea, and the scope and scale of the idea.

What will NSF do with the Big Ideas it receives through this contest?

- A. NSF will use the Big Ideas from this contest to inform its long-term planning for future investments. The Big Ideas may be modified or combined by NSF staff and used to develop new funding opportunities or programs.

When is the NSF 2026 Idea Machine complete?

- A. The Idea Machine is complete when the winning entries are announced and the prizes are awarded. However, NSF may use the ideas generated by the NSF 2026 Idea Machine to inform long-term planning and development of research programs after the contest is complete.

Will there be a second Idea Machine?

- A. NSF will review the results of the initial Idea Machine, before deciding whether to have a second one.

What prizes will be awarded for the best Big Ideas?

- A. Cash prizes and public recognition of the best entries will be awarded as follows:
- Each final winning entry will receive a grand prize of **\$26,000** and its authors (individuals or teams) will be invited to a recognition event in the Washington, D.C. area.
 - ◆ If the winning entry was submitted by a team, the cash prize will go to the team leader, who will be responsible for sharing the prize with other team members.
 - ◆ If the winning entry resulted from a formal collaboration during stages 2 and 3 among the authors of essentially identical, original entries, the cash prize will be divided among the authors / team leaders of the multiple original entries.
 - Each entry recommended by the Blue-Ribbon Panel for final consideration by NSF will receive an honorable mention at the winner recognition event.
 - Authors (individual or team members) of the entries selected by the Blue-Ribbon Panel for virtual interviews will receive a cash prize of **\$1,000**.
 - Authors (individual or team members) of the entries invited to submit video pitches will receive thank-you letters from NSF leadership.
 - The top approximately 100 entries will receive public recognition by being posted on the Idea Machine website.

What is the schedule for the Idea Machine?

- A. The tentative schedule for the NSF 2026 Idea Machine is shown below. All dates are approximate. NSF reserves the right to shift dates, and to add or remove steps as necessary.

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