



NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION  
2415 EISENHOWER AVENUE  
ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA 22314

**NSF 21-042**

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for Mid-Career Advancement (MCA)

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## 1. **What is the MCA?**

The Mid-Career Advancement (MCA) is a new cross-directorate program that offers an opportunity for scientists and engineers at the Associate Professor or equivalent rank, with at least three years at that rank, to substantively enhance and advance their research program and career trajectories through partnerships, typically at an institution other than their home institution.

## 2. **What are the goals of the MCA?**

Two of the major goals are broadening participation and workforce development. The MCA enables a more diverse STEM workforce by facilitating research productivity and creativity from mid-career scientists and engineers. This targeted career stage is one where researchers typically have fewer institutional resources, higher service and teaching responsibilities, and a need for retooling. Data show that women, persons with disabilities, and underrepresented minorities spend more time with service and teaching at the expense of research. This may lower the likelihood of their ability to progress to the highest academic and leadership ranks. The MCA provides a mechanism to improve broadening participation and will thus contribute to fostering a more diverse, world-class science and engineering workforce. The MCA also enables bold and innovative convergence research by increasing networking and communication within and across fields of S&E.

## 3. **What key components of an MCA proposal differ from the PAPPG?**

See PAPPG Chapter II.C.2 for guidance on the required sections of a full research proposal submitted to the NSF. The MCA solicitation ([21-516](#)) provides information specific to this new program. For example, all MCA proposals must include the following two letters uploaded as Supplementary Documents: a) Letter of Collaboration by the Partner(s) and b) Departmental Letter. The title of the MCA proposal must begin with "MCA:". In addition to requirements in the PAPPG (e.g., Broader Impacts), the MCA proposal must include the following three sections: Section 1. Candidate's Past Research; Section 2. Candidate's Proposed Research Advancement and Training Plan; and Section 3. Candidate's Long-Term Career Plans. The Partner(s) must also include a biosketch as a supplementary document; however, please note, the Partner is not allowed to serve as a co-PI.

## 4. **Who is eligible to serve as a PI?**

Scientists and engineers whose current or proposed research falls within the purview of

a participating program (see [solicitation](#) or the [list of participating programs](#)) and who have been at the Associate Professor rank (or equivalent) for at least three years by the time of submission are eligible to apply. Five NSF directorates are currently accepting proposals [Biological Sciences (BIO), Education and Human Resources (EHR), Engineering (ENG), Geological Sciences (GEO), and Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences (SBE)], but not all divisions or programs within each directorate are participating at this time. Contact [MCA.info@nsf.gov](mailto:MCA.info@nsf.gov) for specific questions or peruse [MCA contacts](#) for cognizant Program Officers.

**5. Am I eligible if I work at a non-degree-granting organization such as a museum, observatory, or research lab?**

Yes, but you must have an Associate Professor Equivalency appointment for at least 3 years. Equivalency is defined as meeting all of the following requirements: "(1) the employee has a continuing appointment that is expected to last for at least the duration of the grant; (2) the appointment has substantial research and educational and/or service responsibilities; and (3) the proposed project relates to the employee's career goals and job responsibilities as well as to the mission of the department or organization." The required Departmental Letter supplementary document must "affirm that the candidate's appointment is at a mid-career level equivalent to Associate status (with at least three years at that rank), and it must also clearly and convincingly demonstrate how the candidate's appointment satisfies all the above requirements of Associate Professor equivalency."

**6. Am I eligible if I work at a 2-yr college or community college?**

Yes, if your appointment meets the MCA eligibility requirements.

**7. What if I am being considered for promotion to Full Professor but will be at the rank of Associate by the proposal submission date?**

While you would be eligible to apply while being considered for promotion and still at the Associate Professor rank (or equivalent), your proposal and the Departmental Letter must provide a compelling argument about how the MCA would help to advance your research program and academic career in a way not likely without such support.

**8. Can Research Associate Professors (non-tenure track) apply?**

Yes, as long as the following criteria are met:

***Associate Professor Equivalency*** - For a position to be considered an Associate Professor equivalent position, it must meet all of the following requirements: (1) the employee has a continuing appointment that is expected to last for at least the duration of the grant; (2) the appointment has substantial research and educational and/or

service responsibilities; and (3) the proposed project relates to the employee's career goals and job responsibilities as well as to the mission of the department or organization. As stated in the Proposal Preparation Instructions, the Departmental Letter must affirm that the candidate's appointment is at a mid-career level equivalent to Associate status (with at least three years at that rank), and the Departmental Letter must clearly and convincingly demonstrate how the candidate's appointment satisfies all the above requirements of Associate Professor equivalency.

**9. Is there a deadline?**

The MCA has a target date of February 1, 2021 and then the first Monday in February annually thereafter.

**10. Is the required Partner the same thing as a Collaborator?**

No, not exactly. The MCA solicitation emphasizes that the collaboration between the candidate and the Partner(s) should be synergistic, mutually beneficial, and go beyond that which would typically occur through a normal collaborative grant, for example, by opening new avenues of research. The MCA seeks to enable quality networking and mentorship through these partnerships. The candidate and Partner must be engaged in a research project that addresses fundamental challenges in the scientific discipline to which the proposal is submitted, and that is likely to result in publications and a foundation for future competitive proposals. The Partner(s) must write a Letter of Collaboration and submit this as a supplementary document. Details on what should be included in this letter are in the MCA solicitation. The Partner(s) cannot be listed as a co-PI but should instead be designated as senior personnel or consultants.

**11. Does the Partner have to be at a particular academic (or equivalent) rank?**

No. Partners can be at any rank.

**12. Can the Partner be outside of academia?**

Yes. Partners can be at national labs, museums, or other facilities. Where industry collaborations are planned, the proposal should be submitted as a GOALI proposal and follow the additional guidance here:

[https://www.nsf.gov/pubs/policydocs/pappg20\\_1/pappg\\_2.jsp#IIE4](https://www.nsf.gov/pubs/policydocs/pappg20_1/pappg_2.jsp#IIE4). The title of the proposal must begin with "MCA:GOALI". It is encouraged that you contact an appropriate [MCA Program Officer](#) in your research discipline to discuss the appropriateness of the choice of Partner.

**13. Can there be co-PIs on the proposal?**

No. Because MCA awards provide funds to support the mid-career researcher, co-PIs

are not allowed. However, the mid-career researcher can request one month of summer support for the Partner (in lieu of summer support for the Partner, other reasonable collaborative costs may be considered). That support for the Partner(s) should be requested in the senior personnel or consultant services budget line items of the proposal, or as a subaward to the other institution.

**14. Does the Partner need to be U.S. based?**

While you may have a collaborative partner(s) who is not U.S. based, as described in the PAPPG chapter I, IE6 ([https://www.nsf.gov/pubs/policydocs/pappg20\\_1/pappg\\_1.jsp#IE6](https://www.nsf.gov/pubs/policydocs/pappg20_1/pappg_1.jsp#IE6)), funding is rarely provided for a foreign individual or organization's involvement. In exceptional cases, funds may be considered if the following conditions are met: local U.S.-based support is not feasible, the foreign organization can carry out the activity more effectively, and the foreign organization contributes unique expertise or other resources essential to the project. Submitting institutions should make their own determinations about appropriateness of international partners with consideration of the proposed partner's fit with the intended topic area of research and goals of the MCA. The submitting institution is also encouraged to consult with their university counsel, or other appropriate professionals, as needed, to ensure compliance with all U.S. laws, including U.S. export-control, sanctions and like regimes.

**15. Do I have to choose a Partner from a different institution?**

Not necessarily, but the partnership is an important component of the MCA and should be well justified. The collaboration between the PI and the Partner(s) should be mutually beneficial and create "added value" beyond that which would occur through a typical collaboration (for example, by opening new avenues of inquiry).

**16. Do I have to choose a Partner from a different field of science or engineering than my own?**

No, although selection of a Partner(s) from outside the PI's own subdiscipline or discipline is encouraged to enhance interdisciplinary networking and convergence research across science and engineering fields.

**17. What is a typical budget like for the MCA?**

MCA awards provide funds to the PI and include a) a total of 6.5 months of salary support to be spent over the course of the entire award (3 years), and b) \$100,000 in direct costs in support of the research and training plan. In addition, a total of one month of summer support for the Partner can be requested (in lieu of summer support for the Partner, other reasonable costs may be considered). The budget should also include

funds to cover the cost of attendance of the candidate to a 2-day awardee meeting during the first and final years of the award; costs for one Partner to accompany the PI could be included during the first or last year, but not both.

18. **Are relocation costs an allowable expense in the budget?**

Yes, part of the \$100,000.00 for direct costs in support of the research advancement and training plan of the MCA may be used to support temporary relocation costs.