Dear Colleague Letter: Persons with Disabilities – STEM Engagement and Access (PWD-SEA)

August 5, 2021

Dear Colleagues:

With this Dear Colleague Letter, the National Science Foundation’s (NSF) Directorate for Education and Human Resources (EHR), with leadership from the Division of Human Resource Development (HRD), seeks to increase the engagement of persons with disabilities in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields and STEM education. Educating, preparing, and supporting persons with all types of disabilities, and of all ages, improves the skills of our nation’s current and future STEM workforce, as well as improves the prospects for all Americans to learn, work, and contribute to U.S. leadership in science and engineering discovery and innovation. A wide range of disability types are recognized in this Dear Colleague Letter including, but not limited to, deafness or hearing loss; blindness or visual impairment; physical, mental health, medical or other health-related disabilities; and neurodiverse conditions (e.g., dyslexia, autism spectrum disorders, learning disabilities).

This Dear Colleague Letter particularly encourages submission of new proposals, or requests for supplemental funding to existing awards, to support existing or new access to and engagement in STEM learning, research, and workforce development at proposing or awardee organizations for students, postdoctoral scholars, or faculty and staff with disabilities. New proposals or supplemental funding requests to existing awards may also request support for the inclusion of persons with disabilities as participants. (Such new proposals and supplemental funding requests are not intended for research subjects.)

Proposers are encouraged to discuss new proposals, that will support access and engagement for persons with disabilities in STEM, with the relevant program before submission. Prior to submitting a supplemental funding request, approval must be obtained from the cognizant NSF program director for the original award. New proposals and supplemental funding requests must adhere to the guidance of the program solicitation, announcement, or program description to which the proposal will be submitted.
Proposers are encouraged to explore a wide range of actions to support access to and engagement in STEM learning, research, and employment activities of persons with disabilities, such as, but not limited to:

- Stipends for K-12 students and teachers, undergraduate students and/or graduate students with disabilities to provide greater access to and engagement in EHR-funded STEM education and research project activities, and/or STEM education and research training.
- Funding to increase time and effort for undergraduate students, graduate students, postdoctoral research scholars, staff, faculty and/or senior personnel with disabilities to work on EHR-funded STEM education and research project activities.
- Support for technology, tools, equipment and instrumentation, and the physical modifications necessary to access them (e.g., elevated or lowered lab table), in research labs, libraries, informal science settings, field-based environments and/or classrooms that ensure students, postdoctoral research scholars, K-12 teachers, staff and faculty with disabilities will have greater access to and engagement in STEM research, teaching, training and learning.

A full list of EHR programs encouraging the access and engagement of persons with disabilities in new proposals, and that will accept supplemental funding requests for existing awards, is available here: https://www.nsf.gov/ehr/PWDSEAPrgrams.jsp. New proposals and supplemental funding requests should be prepared and submitted following the guidance in the NSF Proposal & Award Policies & Procedures Guide (PAPPG) and also must adhere to the due dates and guidance specified in the program solicitation, announcement, or program description to which the proposal will be submitted.

Organizations submitting new proposals are encouraged to highlight the request for funds to support STEM access and engagement for persons with disabilities in the Project Summary, the Project Description and the Budget Justification. The receiving program will determine whether and at what level to fund new proposals or supplement requests.

Additional, existing funding avenues at NSF also serve persons with disabilities:

- Facilitation Awards for Scientists and Engineers with Disabilities (FASED) requests are made in conjunction with the submission of regular competitive proposals, or as a supplemental funding request to an existing NSF award. The goals of NSF’s FASED funding are to reduce or remove barriers to participation in research and training by persons with physical disabilities by providing special equipment and assistance under awards made by NSF; and to encourage persons with disabilities to pursue careers in science and engineering by stimulating the development and demonstration of special equipment that facilitates their work performance. Details about how to request FASED funding are provided in Chapter II.E of the PAPPG.
Several engineering programs at NSF support research related to rehabilitation [https://www.nsf.gov/eng/rehab.jsp]. Most notable is the Disability and Rehabilitation Engineering (DARE) program. DARE supports fundamental engineering research that will improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities through the development of new technologies, devices, or software. These developments must also advance knowledge regarding a specific human disability (sensory, cognitive, movement-related, or others), pathological motion, or injury mechanism. Investigators and trainees with disabilities are encouraged to apply to the DARE program.

For more information, please contact Dr. Mark Leddy, EHR Division of Human Resource Development, mleddy@nsf.gov or PWDSEA@nsf.gov.

Sincerely,

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