

SPARK: Supporting Pathways for Advancement, Research, and Knowledge Seed Grant Program

Frequently Asked Questions

Deadline: February 16, 2026, by 5 PM CT

- *What is the timing of the grants?*

The grants follow the federal fiscal year (FFY) that starts on Oct. 1. For the current cycle:

FFY2027: Oct. 1, 2026-Sept. 30, 2027

FFY2028: Oct. 1, 2027-Sept. 30, 2028

Submission deadline: **February 16, 2026 by 5 PM CT**

- *What is interdisciplinary research?*

We use the National Academies' definition: "Interdisciplinary research is a mode of research by teams or individuals that integrates information, data, techniques, tools, perspectives, concepts, and/or theories from two or more disciplines or bodies of specialized knowledge to advance fundamental understanding or to solve problems whose solutions are beyond the scope of a single discipline or area of research practice."

- *Who can be a PI for a SPARK award?*

The SPARK seed grant program is open to **all tenure- and nontenure-track Assistant Professor faculty who will not be up for promotion prior to September 2026**. The Lead PI must also be an Assistant Professor with a primary appointment within ACES.

- *Can teams include faculty members from the same department?*

Tenured faculty or specialized faculty may serve in the role of Co-I or collaborator, but the project is expected to be the product of the PI and align with their area of expertise.

- *Can departments and institutions outside of ACES be included in the team?*

Yes. The Office of Research recognizes the importance of collaborating with colleagues within and outside ACES. Inclusion of faculty members from other departments/units/colleges is highly encouraged.

- *What level of detail is required in the proposal?*

Reviewers may or may not have expertise in the proposed area of research. As such, applicants should write to a broad audience and clearly describe the roles and contributions of team members. Ensure that the proposal is written to a nonspecialist reviewer. Applicants should avoid being overly technical in the description of their approach.

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- *Who can be considered Co-PIs and collaborators on the project?*

Anyone essential to the project can be listed as a Co-PI. Although this will primarily be other faculty members, postdoctoral and graduate students can also be Co-PIs and collaborators.

- *Can tenure-track and specialized assistant professors serve as PI on a SPARK award while also participating in a FIRE award?*

Yes, tenure-track and specialized assistant professors may serve as a PI on a SPARK award and also concurrently serve as a Co-I or collaborator on a FIRE award. However, the two projects must be distinct from each other.

- *What does “alignment with current areas of strength” mean in the RFP? What kind of research qualifies for a SPARK award?*

“Alignment with current areas of strength” refers to:

- Identifying a research theme or question that gives coherence to the project and relates to the scope of programs within the College of ACES.
- Ensuring that your proposed activities are a logical progression given each team member’s expertise and past research, and that they pertain to the College of ACES scope of research.

All proposals submitted to the SPARK seed grant program must be new and not an extension of an existing research program or project. The intention of the SPARK award is to encourage creative and innovative research programs.

- *What should be included in the “Plans for Execution and Continuation” section?*

Provide specific plans and next steps to continue the selected research idea. Include a clear path to what the team plans to accomplish, a detailed plan for obtaining future extramural support, and a description of how the project would evolve after receiving future funding. For example, provide a relevant example where the team may use SPARK-generated preliminary data to apply for a specific funding opportunity wherever possible. For example:

- NIFA AFRI FAS (e.g., Novel Foods and Innovative Manufacturing Technologies)
- NIH R01 (e.g., New Approaches for Measuring Brain Changes Across Longer Timespans)
- NSF Standard Grant (e.g., Organismal Response to Climate Change [ORCC])
- DOE (e.g., Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy [ARPA-E])
- ...

- *Does SPARK support collaborators external to the university?*

No. Funds provided in this program cannot be transferred to another institution or external collaborator. This program prioritizes interdisciplinary collaboration within the University of Illinois. External collaborations are allowed if there is no cost to the University of Illinois.

- *How much detail is needed for the budget? Will a budget template be provided?*

Each applicant is required to use the modified SPA budget template. Applicants must also

provide a budget justification with the proposal.

- *How should fringe benefits, tuition remission, and indirect costs be handled?*

Hatch formula funds support the SPARK program. For salaries, include the appropriate fringe benefits within the \$60,000. Hatch funding has different fringe benefit rates depending on the type of position (e.g., post-doc, student hourly, etc.). The Hatch fringe benefit rates are built into the budget template. Tuition remission costs do not need to be included in the budget. Consult your department business manager for details.

- *Can faculty summer salary be included in the budget?*

No. Summer salary is not funded through the SPARK program.

- *Can travel be included in the budget?*

Yes. Domestic travel for meetings and conferences, including programmatic and administrative/fiscal conferences that benefit the award and are necessary to accomplish the goals of the award, is allowable if the costs are reasonable and consistent with the university's travel policy. This includes US territories, Mexico, and Canada travel to conferences/trainings directly related to the grant, benefit the grant, and are allocated proportionally to staff appointment, if appropriate.

International travel for personnel external to the University of Illinois is not allowed.

- *What should be included in the paragraph of professional information?*

The professional information can include a short description of the team member's research, publication, and grant awards record. This should be given in the context of the proposal. You can indicate the number of publications and grants in the last 5 years (i.e., Publications: X, Grants: X) or details of those publications and grants as appropriate for the application.

- *Can support letters be included?*

To reduce the burden of proposal preparation, the Office of Research strongly discourages the inclusion of support letters.

- *Can additional materials be provided in a supplementary section?*

All the necessary materials needed to review the proposal are requested in the RFP. Do not include additional supplementary documents such as articles, reprints, posters, methodology, and survey questions.

- *Do you need to have an active Hatch project to apply?*

No. You can apply without having an active Hatch project. However, if you receive a SPARK award, you must have a Hatch project or a Multi-state project with overlapping objectives with your SPARK proposal to receive the funds.



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- *Will there be another call for SPARK proposals? If so, when?*

Future funding and timing of calls for the SPARK program depend on faculty feedback and funding availability.

- *Where do I submit my application?*

Proposals should be submitted online via the [OVCRI Special Programs tool](#) as a combined .pdf file. The submission portal will be opened when the SPARK RFP is issued.