



NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION
2415 EISENHOWER AVENUE
ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA 22314

NSF 23-031

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for Mathematical and Physical Sciences Ascending Postdoctoral Research Fellowships (MPS-Ascend) (NSF 23-501)

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apply?

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ELIGIBILITY

1. **Must the applicant have their PhD *in-hand* by the solicitation deadline?**

The Fellow must have completed all the requirements for a doctoral degree before the start of the appointment. The degree does not to be conferred at the start of the appointment.

2. **What date can a fellowship begin?**

It is unlikely that start dates could be prior to May 1, 2023, and will depend on the speed of the review process and your availability to begin the postdoctoral position. The latest start date is Sept. 1, 2023. You can decide on a firm start date when you are notified of an award.

3. Must the applicant have already started a postdoc position?

It is expected that the MPS-Ascend postdoc tenure will not begin until the award is granted. The MPS-Ascend award should not replace other existing funds for a postdoctoral position already in place.

4. Am I eligible to apply for the Ascend Fellowship if am currently in a postdoc position and I plan to remain in this setting with my current mentor?

The intention of the program is to provide support to fellows who wouldn't otherwise be able to be supported by their chosen sponsor. If you plan to stay with the same sponsoring scientist, you must strongly justify why that is the best option for you (in terms of career experience, mentoring, etc.) in the proposal.

5. Can my current institution for postdoc be the host institution for this fellowship?

Yes, but the solicitation asks that you clearly explain in the proposal why staying at the same institution is the best choice for your specific situation and career goals/plans.

6. Is an individual eligible to apply if currently supported by another mechanism, e.g., a non-NSF fellowship program or funds from a PI's grant (NSF or other agency), or similar mechanism?

If the applicant already has postdoctoral support from another agency/organization, no, the applicant is not eligible for the Ascend program, unless the support is scheduled to end before the starting date of the Ascend Fellowship. The Ascend Fellowship cannot be used to replace funds from another agency or NSF award.

7. Must the host institution be U.S.-based? Could it be a national lab?

Appropriate host institutions include U.S. institutions of higher education, private nonprofit institutes and museums, government installations and laboratories, and scientific facilities such as observatories. For applicants to AST, NASA or Department of Energy (DOE) supported centers are not eligible host institutions. Fellows are expected to be fully integrated into the research and educational activities of their host institution. The postdoctoral support can be requested for between 12 and 36 months, depending on the research plan and the nature of the science. It is allowable to spend all or portions of the Fellowship tenure at international sites that are operated by U.S. organizations eligible for NSF funding, such as the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array, Gemini South, or the Large Hadron Collider, among others, provided the sponsoring scientist at the host institution addresses this in the documentation (see preparation instructions).

8. Can participate if I have an H1B Visa? Can international students apply?

No. Only US citizens or nationals or legally admitted permanent residents of the U.S. (at the time the proposal is submitted) are eligible to apply.

9. If a candidate accepts a job while a proposal is pending, can they remain a candidate?

When we are ready to make awards, you will be contacted to see if you are still interested. You should not stop applying for jobs or other opportunities because you have applied for an Ascend Fellowship. If for any reason you are no longer interested in receiving a Fellowship prior to hearing about the results, please contact us.

10. If an applicant is currently a postdoctoral fellow but will be appointed as Assistant Professor Nov. 1, 2023, are they eligible to apply?

No, because you cannot be a postdoctoral fellow and an assistant professor simultaneously. Awards will be between 12 and 36 months and likely start no earlier than May 1, 2023. You could not complete the fellowship prior to the start of your tenure track appointment.

11. If I applied previously and was not awarded an Ascend Fellowship, can I apply again? How should I specifically address reviewer comments?

Yes, you can apply again as long as you still meet the eligibility requirements. The new reviewers will not know that you applied before. Every submission is a new submission. We advise that you consider the reviewer comments and revise, but we also advise that you do not reveal to the new reviewers that this is a revision. Let them view the new submission from a fresh perspective.

12. If someone receives this postdoc award, can they apply for a LEAPS award when they become a faculty member?

Yes! This is considered a "Fellowship" award and does not preclude subsequent LEAPS eligibility.

13. Do I need to be a member of one of the defined underrepresented groups to apply?

No, you do not need to be a member of one of the defined underrepresented groups to successfully apply to the Ascend program. But **all** applicants must present a compelling plan to address broadening participation of people in the defined groups in STEM. This is an important and essential part of the proposal. Reviewers will want to know that your interest in this area is genuine. It may be that most of your time previously was directed to research. But your plans moving forward will need to be robust in terms of broadening participation for success in this program. Providing examples, related to your plans of

what has been documented to work, will help to show you have knowledge and interest in the area. Pointing to prior activity would further this.

14. I was previously supported in another NSF Postdoctoral Fellowship program. Can I apply?

No. You are not eligible to apply if you have previously been a principal investigator or co-principal investigator of an NSF award (other than a graduate research fellowship or an award in support of a conference or workshop).

BUDGET

15. Can the Ascend funds be used to pay for equipment and lab supplies?

The funds can be used to purchase materials, but these funds are limited and access to large equipment should be supplied by the host institution.

16. Can the Ascend funds be used for travel?

Yes, Ascend funds can be used for travel purposes related to the Fellowship. Requests for foreign travel usual requires the approval of an NSF Program Director.

17. Can the Ascend funds be used to pay for supplies for outreach activities? Who would own these materials after the end of the award?

Yes, the funds can be used to pay for supplies for outreach activities. These materials are the property of the Fellow.

18. Can the Ascend funds be used to support the research participation of undergraduate students from underrepresented groups?

Yes, but you should talk with your mentor and the institution where you'll be performing the work about logistics. As a Fellow, you will not be an employee of the university, and NSF will provide both salary and the \$30k directly to you. The logistics of supporting students from these funds may be complicated.

19. Do I need to find my own health insurance and other benefits?

You will not be an employee of your host institution. You can use your fellowship allowance to purchase benefits. You should discuss the options with your host institution.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

20. Is the number of reference (not collaboration) letters capped at 3?

Yes.

21. Should preference be given to letter writers who can speak to the applicant's research background or outreach activities?

In addition to a required letter from the applicant's doctoral advisor, it is recommended that letter writers be selected based on who knows the applicant's abilities in either research or broadening participation best.

22. Are preliminary data expected in the proposal?

No, preliminary data are not required, but any evidence of feasibility of the project helps make a strong proposal. This applies to theoretical proposals as well as experimental proposals.

23. Should letters of collaboration be provided from research collaborators or organizations participating in outreach (e.g., a local grade school)?

These letters are not required for the application, but are often advised. If collaborators participating or facilitating outreach activities rise to the level secondary mentors, such letters should be included. If collaboration letters are included, they must follow the requirements of the solicitation:

- "Any needed letters of collaboration (such as those required for access to equipment at national labs or facilities, or access to a collaborator, etc.) must follow the NSF format.
- If the proposal submitted by Dr. [insert the full name of the Principal Investigator] entitled [insert the proposal title] is selected for funding by NSF, it is my intent to collaborate and/or commit resources as detailed in the Project Description or the Facilities, Equipment and Other Resources section of the proposal."

OTHER

24. How can I indicate which MPS Division funds the type of research that would be supported in this proposal?

As described in the solicitation, when submitting the proposal in the proposal set-up step, you will search for and select this solicitation title. Select the [NSF 23-501](#) MPS-Ascend solicitation. The NSF Unit of Consideration will auto select "Office of Multidisciplinary Activities" as the primary unit within MPS. To indicate the required secondary unit of consideration, follow the solicitation instructions for preparing the **Project Summary**. You will list one of the five MPS Divisions. Choose the most appropriate Division with a program that would fund this type of research. This will help us sort the proposals when they arrive at NSF.

25. The solicitation synopsis states "The purpose of the Mathematical and Physical Sciences Ascending Postdoctoral Research Fellowship (MPS-Ascend) program is to support postdoctoral Fellows who will broaden the participation of members of groups that are historically excluded and currently underrepresented in MPS fields in the U.S., defined in this solicitation as Blacks or African Americans, Hispanics, Latinos, Indigenous and Native Americans Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians and other Native Pacific Islanders, as future leaders in MPS fields. May the applicant choose to address other underrepresented groups, such as first-generation students, rural students, or others?"

Yes, as long as the main focus is to broaden the participation of groups that are underrepresented in MPS fields in the U.S. that are specified in the solicitation: Blacks or African Americans, Hispanics, Latinos, Indigenous and Native Americans, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians or other Native Pacific Islanders. Groups beyond those listed above should not be the main focus of broadening participation efforts.

26. Is educational research supported?

For the most part no. The proposal must describe research within the scope of topic areas covered by the five MPS Divisions, which are: Astronomical Sciences (AST), Chemistry (CHE), Materials Research (DMR), Mathematical Sciences (DMS), and Physics (PHY). PHY does support a limited amount of Physics Education Research aimed at Physics majors.

27. How does the Broader Impacts section differ from the Broadening Participation plan?

All proposals submitted to NSF will be reviewed according to the intellectual merit and the broader impacts. Some proposals have additional solicitation specific review criteria. General information about Broader Impacts can be found here: <https://www.nsf.gov/od/oia/special/broaderimpacts/> Broadening Participation is a type of Broader Impact. The MPS Ascend solicitation has specific review criteria that includes special emphasis on broadening participation.

28. What if the proposed research is interdisciplinary and crosses multiple MPS/NSF divisions?

Interdisciplinary proposals are welcomed if they overlap with at least one MPS division program. If there is substantial overlap between MPS Divisions both Divisions will be involved in the review of the proposal.

29. How many awards will be made across the five divisions?

We anticipate making 20-50 awards in 2023 spread across the five Divisions.

30. How many awards were made last year and how can I find successful examples of broadening participation activities?

Navigate to the MPS-Ascend webpage:

<https://beta.nsf.gov/funding/opportunities/mathematical-and-physical-sciences-ascending-postdoctoral-research>.

At the bottom of the page click on the tab "Browse projects funded by this program". Doing so will return search results of the NSF abstracts showing 64 funded awards in the past 2 years. Browse through the abstracts to see the range of ideas included.

31. For the outreach and support of underrepresented groups, can we propose new initiatives as well as joining ongoing initiatives?

This is up to you. We hope you will be creative and passionate. If you have a creative new idea for the broadening participation plan, this is an excellent time to experiment and develop your own approaches. But you should not feel you have to "reinvent the wheel". It is also perfectly acceptable to leverage existing, successful programs and resources. However, it should be made clear the added value of your participation in existing activities. How does funding your fellowship further expand or enhance these efforts?

32. For an applicant who is not a member of one of the designated underrepresented groups, what would a successful activity look like with regard to promoting the participation of underrepresented groups in MPS? What is expected of someone who just finished a PhD and concentrated on producing research?

As mentioned, you do not need to be a member of one of the defined underrepresented groups to successfully apply to the Ascend program. But **all** applicants must present a compelling plan to address broadening participation. This is an important and essential part of the proposal. Reviewers will want to know that your interest in this area is genuine. It may be that most of your time previously was directed to research. But your plans moving forward will need to be robust in terms of broadening participation for success in this program. Providing examples, related to your plans of what has been documented to work, will help to show you have knowledge and interest in the area. Pointing to prior activity would further this.

33. How can I submit confidential letters of reference?

The solicitation does not allow for confidential letters, as you will need to upload them into Research.gov yourself. Please inform your recommendation letter providers that this is how their letters will be submitted to NSF.

34. May the Fellow change sponsoring institutions and/or scientific mentors during the Ascend supported postdoctoral appointment?

Yes, but NSF should be contacted in advance and prior NSF approval sought in advance with appropriate justification for the change.

35. Can I have a secondary mentor?

Yes, but there is only one primary, scientific mentor and only one letter is allowed. That one letter should comprehensively describe your mentoring and the roles of all mentors and collaborators during the fellowship. Please see the solicitation for more detail. You should address the need for two mentors in the body of the proposal.

36. What is the difference between the scientific mentor and a postdoc advisor?

There is no difference. They are the same.

37. When will awards be announced?

We strive to act on 75% of proposals submitted to any program within 6 months. Given this timeline we expect that decisions will be made by the end of June. Our intent is to act quickly and inform awardees sooner than this, but the timeline for the review, and the availability of funds are often beyond our control.

38. If we have not received an NSF proposal before do we leave this section blank in our proposal or just put no?

It is best to put NA in this section so that it is clear you did not skip it. Many (most) fellowship applicants will not have received prior NSF support.

39. My scientific mentor has two appointments. Should I list both as the host institution or do I specify just one?

Chose the one where you will do the majority of the work. You can mention the second institution in the body of the proposal. Your sponsoring scientist can also address this in their letter.