

EMERGING CHALLENGES in BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH (ECBR)
Promoting Health Equity in Research
Request for Applications (RFA) – Deadline June 29, 2021

The UNC **School of Medicine’s Office of Research** ([OoR](#)) sponsors an annual pilot program, *Emerging Challenges in Biomedical Research (ECBR)*, to provide support for innovative, early-stage research relevant to external strategic funding priorities.

For the 2021 round of funding, the OoR is partnering with the **North Carolina Translational and Clinical Sciences** ([NC TraCS](#)) Institute and the UNC Center for Health Equity Research ([CHER](#)) to provide pilot funding for innovative, early-stage research projects that broadly address strategies for reducing health disparities and promoting equity for historically marginalized populations. Awards will provide up to \$50,000 in funding for a 12-month project period.

I. Purpose

Despite notable improvements gained because of technological advancements in medicine, there continues to be an alarming disproportionate burden of illness among racial and ethnic minority and other health disparity populations. The SOM and NC TraCS are dedicated to addressing these disparities. The purpose of this RFA is to facilitate research that promotes health equity for groups who have traditionally been under-represented or excluded in health research or disproportionately affected by illness and lack of access to medical care (e.g., people who live in rural areas, populations with low socioeconomic status; people with disabilities; adolescents; older adults; the LGBTQ community; African American, Native American, Asian American, and Latinx populations). We are seeking projects that can be completed within 12 months and have strong potential to inform subsequent grant applications to the NIH or other external funding agencies.

Projects across the translational spectrum will be supported and should: Promote research to understand and to improve minority health; Advance scientific understanding of the causes of health disparities; Develop and test multi-level interventions to reduce health disparities; or Create and improve scientific methods, metrics, measures, and tools to study the causes of health disparities and develop solutions. We are particularly interested in applications that will provide preliminary data for intervention and implementation studies that will reduce disparities. Applicants should clearly state how their proposed project is designed to further health equity for the underrepresented groups listed above. Engagement in the research planning and conduct with the minority community is also an important component of health disparities research. Applicants should consider the [NIMHD framework](#) and/or other theoretical frameworks that center the perspectives of historically marginalized populations.

Examples of the types of projects appropriate for this RFA include, but are not limited to:

- Projects that address health disparities in one or more of the populations listed above
- Projects that test interventions to address social determinants of health

- Methods and strategies for increasing the inclusion of under-represented populations in research
- Pilot efforts lead to developing, testing, and disseminating multilevel interventions to achieve health and healthcare equity in one or more of the populations listed above.
- Develop and test community-level interventions to improve minority health and reduce health disparities
- Observational research to understand the role of structural racism and/or discrimination in causing and sustaining health disparities,

II. Key Dates

Proposals Due	June 29, 2021
Review and Award Decision	Within 9 weeks of application deadline

III. Funding and PI Eligibility

The SOM OoR, NC TraCS Institute and UNC CHER plan to contribute funds to these awards, however the eligibility requirements are slightly depending on the funding source.

OoR plans to fund up to 3 pilot awards. Because SOM funds are being used to support this RFA, this funding opportunity is open to faculty with primary appointments in the SOM or faculty whose grants are administered by the SOM. Multi-PI teams must include one SOM PI. No cost share (“match”) is required provided the PI is a SOM PI.

For teams that do not include **any** SOM PIs, the applicant can apply if they can provide match funds. For those applications, the match funding source and amount should be included where specified in the application.

Applicants from outside the SOM who would like to seek match from CHER should contact [G. Dave](#) to discuss this possibility.

Applications with multiple PIs (“co-PIs”) must identify one PI as the main contact PI, with primary responsibility for the administrative aspects of the pilot award. Study teams that involve cross-disciplinary collaborations are strongly encouraged.

Researchers whose appointments allow them to serve as PI on externally sponsored research projects are eligible to apply as PI. This generally means permanent faculty (not adjunct appointments) and includes those with non-faculty appointments like “research scientist” and investigators from research institutes and centers who are eligible to apply for investigator-initiated awards and R01-level funding. Applications may also include collaborators or co-investigators from NC TraCS’ partner institutions; please contact [Mary Beth Cassely](#) to discuss guidelines for expending pilot funds at other institutions, and for other questions regarding investigator eligibility.

Pilot grant awards are not meant as bridge funds or as supplementary funding for existing grants. The proposed project should represent a new project and not significantly overlap with the aims of existing funding (external or internal awards). This must be **clearly evident** in the application.

Funds cannot be subcontracted to other institutions. NC TraCS cannot fund pilot grants where the research is conducted outside the United States.

IV. Use of NC TraCS Services

NC TraCS offers members a variety of research services and expertise, and applicants are encouraged to utilize those services in pilot grant applications where appropriate. A full list of NC TraCS services can be found [here](#). NC TraCS services that require the investigator to contribute to the cost of the service should be consulted prior to submission to ensure that the application budget includes accurate information. Applicants are **not** required to use NC TraCS services in their pilot projects. [NC TraCS Research Navigators](#) are available to offer general advice and assistance with applications prior to submission. [Click here](#) to schedule a consultation (choose “Proposal Development” from the main menu).

NC TraCS very strongly recommends involving a biostatistician in the application development process. The online application form will ask for the name of the biostatistician who consulted on the application.

For investigators without access to a biostatistician, biostatistical support can be obtained through the [NC TraCS Biostatistics Service](#) by completing the “[Request a Consult](#)” form. It is strongly recommended to contact them at least 3 weeks prior to the proposal deadline.

V. Review Criteria

Applications should be presented in a clear and logical fashion, make a convincing case for the significance of the work, and describe the proposed methods in sufficient detail so that an adequate evaluation of the application can be made.

The primary review criterion is that the pilot work has the potential to lead directly to a fundable external proposal for disparities research, written and led by the pilot study PI, and submitted within a year following completion of the pilot project. Preliminary data are not required for the pilot proposal, but some specific evidence that the work has merit scientifically and that the proposed effort is feasible within the timeframe and funding level of the pilot program is required. It is strongly encouraged that the pilot proposal includes specific plans regarding the proposal for external funding following the pilot work.

The following review criteria will be considered:

1. Relevance of the proposed study to disparity populations and health equity
2. Significance of the work
3. Novelty/innovation of the research idea
4. Soundness of the proposed methods
5. Feasibility of accomplishing the stated project goals within the 12-month study period
6. Potential for the project to lead to future external funding

VI. Application Process

Applications must be submitted using the NC TraCS [online grant portal](#). Once in the system scroll down to the section titled “ECBR/Health Disparities Joint Pilot” and click “Apply,” or use the “quick search bar” at the top to search for “ECBR”. Application sections (except the Abstract) will be uploaded as individual PDF files. The application sections are:

1. **Scientific Abstract:** A summary of the application for internal use (250 word maximum).
2. **Impact:** Briefly describe the likelihood for your project to exert a sustained, powerful influence on the research field(s) involved (50 word maximum).
3. **Research Plan:** The Research Plan should include Specific Aims, Significance, Innovation, and Approach. For studies enrolling human subjects, include engagement and recruitment plans either in this section or in the Human Subjects section (number 7 below). Include where applicable clear evidence of how the application meets the review criteria. 1.5 line spacing, font Arial 11 pt., and 1-inch margins all around. (5 page limit, including tables and figures. References do not count towards the page limit.)
4. **Cited References:** (No page limit)
5. **Budget:** Use [PHS 398 Form Page 4](#) (see Section VIII “Budget Guidelines” below for more details). The total budget should not exceed \$50,000.
6. **Budget Justification:** Include sufficient detail for reviewers to assess whether appropriate resources have been requested (see “Budget Guidelines” below). (No page limit)
7. **Timeline:** covering the 12-month funding period.
8. **Human and/or Animal Subjects:** Although Institutional Review Board (IRB) and/or Institutional Animal Care & Use Committee (IACUC) approval is not required at time of submission, the application should briefly describe any human and/or animal subject issues. If human subjects will be involved in the research, provide a description of their involvement and characteristics, study procedures, materials used in the research, potential risks to subjects, the process for recruitment and informed consent, and protection against risks. Provide assurance that the project will be reviewed and approved by an IRB, use a single IRB if the project is multicenter, and comply with HIPAA. If vertebrate animals will be used, provide a description of the proposed use of the animals in the work outlined and procedures for ensuring that discomfort, distress, pain and injury will be limited. Provide assurance that the project will be reviewed and approved by an IACUC. Note that no funds will be released without the requisite approvals in place. (No page limit)
9. **NIH Biosketches:** for the key members of the research team.
10. **Letters of Collaboration** (if applicable): Letters of Collaboration may be included if they clearly state a commitment of resources required for the project’s success, for example biobank samples being made available to the investigator. Generic or non-specific letters of support are not required or encouraged. (No page limit)

VII. Budget Guidelines

1. The pilot grant budget covers expenditures of up to \$50,000 for a 12-month period. The budget period will begin when applicable IRB/IACUC documentation is provided and the PI indicates everything is in place for the project to begin. If the PI is not ready to start within 4 months of notification of funding, the SOM and NC TraCS reserve the right to withdraw the award. The expectation is that all funds will be expended by the end of the grant period.
2. Projects of all budget sizes up to \$50,000 are encouraged. Budget should be appropriately matched to the scope of the project.
3. Pilot grant funds may be budgeted for (1) research support personnel, (2) use of NC TraCS services, including, where applicable, salary support for NC TraCS biostatisticians, biomedical informaticians or other experts, (3) travel necessary to perform the research, (4) equipment, research supplies and core lab costs, or (5) other purposes deemed necessary for the successful execution of the proposed project.
4. Pilot grant funds **may not be budgeted for** (1) salary support for the PI or faculty collaborators, (2) office supplies or communication costs, (3) meals or travel, including to conferences, except as required to collect data, (4) UNC-CH IRB fees, (5) professional education or training, (6) manuscript preparation and submission, or (7) indirect costs.

5. Expenditures for services outside of UNC-CH will only be allowed if the equivalent service is not available in-house, and such an expenditure will require thorough justification.

VIII. Other Guidelines

1. Prior to receiving funds, research involving human subjects must have appropriate approvals from the UNC-CH IRB, and research involving animals must have the appropriate IACUC approval. Either an IRB approval letter or an IRB response to a “Determination Whether Research or Similar Activities Require IRB Approval” must be submitted to NC TraCS. Human subjects or animal research must be reviewed in accordance with the university’s general assurances and HIPAA. In addition, if the research involves human subjects, all personnel named on the budget page must have certification of training in the protection of human subjects prior to the start of the grant period.
2. The NC TraCS Institute is funded through a CTSA grant from NIH’s National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS). NCATS requires that they review and approve all NC TraCS pilot grants involving human subjects research prior to funds being released. If your application is funded and involves human subjects research, NC TraCS will require additional documentation to send to NCATS. NCATS generally completes their review in less than 30 days.
3. NC TraCS and SOM Office of Research staff will work closely with funded projects throughout the grant period to monitor progress and provide assistance where necessary. A 6-month interim progress report and a final progress report are required. The PI must report the outcomes achieved due to the pilot award over the lifetime of the work, e.g., subsequent external funding, publications, presentations and patents, and to [acknowledge NC TraCS research support](#) where appropriate.
4. If an awardee leaves their position, they should contact NC TraCS to initiate close-out procedures.

IX. Submission Instructions

Applications will be accepted only through the NC TraCS Institute [online grant portal](#). Applications are due by 5:00pm on the due date. After submitting the application, applicants will receive email confirmation that the application was received. Applicants will be notified by email within 9 weeks of the deadline whether their application has been selected for funding.