



Office of Research

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Advanced Support Program for Innovative Research Excellence in AI (ASPIRE AI)

Request for Proposals

Application Deadline: by 5pm February 18, 2026

Award Announcement anticipated: By end of May

Purpose: ASPIRE-AI funding is provided by the Office of the Vice President for Research to foster interdisciplinary artificial intelligence (AI) research and its applications across academic disciplines. The program aims to catalyze innovative AI projects that advance both fundamental AI methodologies and domain-specific applications, leading to external funding opportunities. ASPIRE-AI especially emphasizes support for interdisciplinary teams combining AI expertise with domain knowledge, and faculty integrating and developing novel AI applications in their research.

Eligibility: Eligible applicants include USC faculty (tenured, tenure-track, and non-tenure track) with independent research programs, employed by any USC campus (Columbia, Schools of Medicine Columbia and Greenville, Senior campuses, and all Palmetto College campuses). This includes but is not limited to clinical, professional, and research track faculty. Faculty at all career stages are eligible to apply.

- Applicants may only submit one proposal to this competition as project lead per round.
- Proposals may include multiple investigators, but one investigator must be designated as the project lead.
- Faculty funded by this program in 2025 as lead PIs are not eligible to submit as lead PIs for this round but may be co-Is/co-PIs.
- Faculty may resubmit a revised proposal that was not funded previously. *Please see the Application Procedure below for additional guidelines for resubmissions.*
- Faculty previously awarded funds from the Office of the Vice President for Research (any faculty program: ASPIRE, RISE, Excel, etc.) must be up-to-date with submitting reports as per the award terms and conditions.

Funds Available and Project Period: ASPIRE-AI projects may be funded up to \$15,000 for 1-2 faculty, and \$25,000-30,000 for 3 or more faculty. The project period is a maximum of 15 months beginning July 1. *VPR internal grants are permitted one account only. Subawards are not permitted.*

Budget Information: It is *required* to use the budget and budget justification forms found on the program webpage. Provide the project budget in the general categories listed on the form. The Budget justification form is used to provide details and explanations for all project expenditures. While the intention is to fund projects as closely as possible to the requested amount, grant awards may be reduced depending on the number of proposals received and the funds available. Cost share is not allowed.

Allowable Costs

- All 9-month FTE Faculty PIs (tenured, tenure-track, and non-tenure track) are allowed to include up to one month of summer salary + fringe, if used directly to work on the funded project (*please note no co-Is/co-PIs are permitted salary support from these funds*)
- Salary and fringe benefits of non-faculty project research personnel, including undergraduate and graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, and technicians

- Consultants and/or contractors
- Capital Equipment (article of non-expendable, tangible property having a useful life of more than one year and an acquisition, or valuation cost of at least \$5,000)
- Project supplies including software and participant incentives **if proposing to buy a license for AI software, it must be preapproved by DoITS*
- Project costs such as animal maintenance and sample testing
- Travel essential to conduct the project; strong justification must be provided.
- Graduate Student Tuition

Unallowable Costs

- Course buyout
- Salary and fringe for Co-PIs or Co-Investigators
- Travel to professional meetings, conferences, etc.
- Food (for use in research, such as participant incentives, related to project events or activities, etc.; *research travel per diem is allowed as above*)
- Costs in connection with faculty degree requirements
- Undergraduate student tuition

Application Procedure and Proposal Preparation: Please use 11-point standard font (such as aptos, calibri, arial, times, etc.), single spaced, and 0.5-inch margins. Assemble the following into a single PDF file:

1. Cover Page with descriptive title of project, name of lead investigator and home unit/department, names and units of co-I/PIs, project topic focus (ex: AI Healthcare, AI STEM, AI Social Sciences, AI Humanities, etc.), the total budget requested, and a brief summary of the proposed work.
2. Proposal Narrative*: Maximum of 5 pages; To include
 - a. A brief discussion of the background and significance of the proposed idea, including its relation to the present state of knowledge in the field.
 - b. A detailed narrative of the project that includes the objectives, significance of the research, the research tasks and expected accomplishments during the course of the project, the specific outcomes of the project, a discussion of potential external funding sources, and a timeline.
 - c. A maximum of one page should be devoted to discussing how the research activity will advance research in the field of AI.

**As per the review rubric, the narrative must be written in language clearly comprehensible to academic scholars outside the applicant's field of study.*

3. Bibliography (format as appropriate by discipline; no page limit)
4. CV/resume* (max 2 pages for each faculty member – PI and co-I/PIs) that includes:
 - Education
 - Professional experience
 - Evidence of scholarship: most significant refereed journal articles, books, book chapters, etc.
 - Significant accomplishments and contributions
 - Other information as appropriate

**Please do not format the CV/Resume as a narrative biographical statement*

5. Current and pending support form (lead PI only) Include current, pending, submitted, and to-be-submitted grant funding and requests for funding (internal and external support) using the form provided on program website.
 - Form is required even if you have no other support; mark “no other grant support”
 - Include all submissions where you are listed as either PI or co-PI/co-I
 - Include all projects receiving or requesting internal or external grant or award support, not just those related to the proposed project

- Include current and pending grant funding as well as submitted and planned submissions in near future for any project
- 6. **Budget form and justification** It is *required* to use the budget and budget justification forms on the program webpage. The budget will be provided in two documents: 1) A detailed budget spreadsheet summarizing project costs consistent with the list of allowable costs above and 2) a budget justification, with details and descriptions of project expenditures, including purpose or role in the project if not obvious or not included in narrative. ***If proposing to buy a license for AI software, it must be preapproved by DoITS. A statement must be included in the budget justification that the proposed software has been cleared with DoITS for purchase with USC funds if project is awarded.**
- 7. **Appendices** are allowed if highly relevant (e.g., letters from outside collaborators confirming role, access to resources not available at USC, etc.); however, do not use appendices to circumvent page limits. *Recommendation letters are not permitted.*
- 8. **Previous VPR Funding Statement (lead PI only)** If you received funding from the Office of the Vice President for Research as lead PI in the past 5 years (not including SPARC or Magellan awards) include a brief appendix that includes the titles, project dates, funding amounts, and description of the impacts for each award.
- 9. **Resubmissions** Investigators may revise and resubmit proposals that were not funded previously. Resubmissions need to include a one-page (max) response to the reviewers and a copy of the reviewer comments. Attach both the response page and comments after the cover page and before the current Proposal Narrative. *Resubmissions lacking the response page and previous reviews will not be reviewed.*

Submission: Combine all the above documents into a single PDF and submit in USCeRA by 5:00pm on deadline above.

- [This USCeRA submission guide may help with the process.](#)
- Be sure to check yes to "Internal Request," then "Vice President for Research" and choose the request type "ASPIRE AI" from the USCeRA drop-down menu to ensure proper proposal routing. Failure to check the box will result in your proposal NOT being submitted.
- The Internal Commit Form is used to enter the total amount you are requesting from the VPR in the Year 1 box. *Do not enter an amount in the Start-Up box.*
- Upload your proposal into USCeRA as a single PDF under the "Proposal/Proposal Summary" or "Other" category. *Do not separate or upload the budget or any other proposal sections or forms as separate documents.*
- Proposals must be submitted in USCeRA by the 5pm deadline but approval by administration/chairs/deans can be pending at that time. *Signatory approval is not required by 5pm.*

Review Process and Criteria: Applications that are complete, responsive, and submitted by the deadline will be evaluated by a peer review panel. Proposals will be evaluated in accordance with the review rubric (posted on program webpage) and final funding decisions will be made by the Vice President for Research.

Post Award Requirements:

Faculty must submit a final report through the on-line report form to the Office of the Vice President of Research 30 days after the project end date as outlined in the project award terms and conditions. *The report form link can be accessed from the program website.* In addition, an external grant submission is required within 1 year of the internal grant enddate.

For questions, please contact:

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