

Mentored Research Development Award (MRDA) Program

Program Goal

The principal goal of the MRDA program is to improve the success rate for grant submissions by junior faculty. To accomplish this objective, MRDA recipients (MRDA Scholars) will work with their chosen mentor(s) to achieve milestones associated with the preparation of a targeted grant application. To assure highly-competitive grant submissions, MRDA Scholars will also take advantage of extensive ACCEL resources. These include grant writing workshops, peer mentoring groups, grant review sessions, support from the Professional Development Core (PDC), and biostatistics and study design consultations with experts from the ACCEL Biostatistics, Epidemiology, and Research Design (BERD) Core.

MRDAs support awardees by releasing them from non-research responsibilities (e.g., clinical work, teaching, administration) and/or providing minimal funding to allow for participation in defined activities associated with writing and submitting a competitive grant proposal. At the end of the MRDA period, awardees are required to submit a fully-developed grant proposal to one of the following:

- i. An IDEa (e.g., CTR, COBRE, INBRE) or other federally funded program (e.g., CTSA, ISPCTN, PEDSNet);
- ii. NIH; PCORI; AHRQ; other federal agency;
- iii. A well-recognized grant-issuing foundation or organization (e.g., AHA, ACS, etc.).

Eligibility

The MRDA program supports junior faculty in their efforts to garner funding to build a program of research. The candidate must be sponsored and supported by a senior investigator / mentor (called the *Sponsoring Mentor* here) who will act as their advocate and primary mentoring contact throughout the process.

The junior faculty applicant must:

- i. Hold a doctoral degree.
- ii. Hold a permanent full-time faculty (e.g., tenure track) level position at CCHS, DSU, Nemours, or UD.¹
- iii. Fulfill the criteria of a NIH *New Investigator* (http://grants.nih.gov/grants/new_investigators/).

The junior faculty applicant **cannot**:

- i. Hold a concurrent ACCEL Research or Pilot Grant. Individuals may simultaneously submit both Pilot and MRDA requests, but if the Pilot Grant is awarded, the MRDA application will be withdrawn;
- ii. Have received a previous ACCEL MRDA for the same research grant opportunity.

Support Provided

MRDAs are designed to offset a portion of non-research effort, such as clinical, teaching, or administrative effort, to provide protected time to develop a grant proposal. If an investigator has sufficient protected time to devote to writing their grant proposal, funds can be requested through the MRDA mechanism for specific activities or services that support development of their grant proposal (e.g., conferences or workshops, technical or professional development

¹ It is expected that a faculty member applying for an MRDA will (i) have a regular faculty appointment at 100% FTE or equivalent under institutional policy, (ii) receive a defined institutional base salary, and (iii) work full time based on the standard IRS definition (at least 30 hours a week). Faculty designations are defined by the institution. If there are questions about eligibility, please contact the PDC at mentoring@de-ctr.org.

courses, study design or data analysis consults, certain resources or supplies, publication fees, a grant editor).

The ACCEL PDC is committed to assuring that MRDA Scholars from all scientific backgrounds and situations are successful. Individuals who have faced significant difficulty in their prior research efforts due to their personal circumstances or the lack of accessible resources in their training environment can request an “enhanced MRDA,” to cover effort or funding above what is provided by a standard MRDA to bolster their professional network and develop their grant proposal. Submission of a request for enhanced levels of support must receive administrative approval prior to submission of a full application.

The Department Head/Chair should be aware of and approve the candidate’s plan for release at the time the preliminary application is submitted and must provide a letter of support with the candidate’s full application indicating their approval of the specified release plan (i.e., both the amount of effort and number of months; the number of courses and number of semesters; administrative effort release; etc.) and clearly indicate the applicant’s need for additional career development resources.

Applicants may apply for one of the following mechanisms:

- I. **Clinical investigators** can receive coverage for up to 20% of their time over 6 months (equivalent to 1.2 calendar months) to work toward the goals of their award. Half of this effort (i.e., half of the percentage of the awardees salary up to the NIH salary cap) is covered by the MRDA and half of this effort must be covered and protected by the clinician’s Division Chief or Department Chair. The time covered by the MRDA can be spread over the entire 6 months (e.g., one day a week) or can be compressed into a shorter timeframe (e.g., five continuous weeks of effort). Although focused effort is often desirable for effective grant writing, it is likely that actual effort developing a grant application will vary across the timeframe covered and time should be flexibly allocated in a way that best suits the applicant, their Sponsoring Mentor, and their home Department/Division. *Those qualifying for a Clinical Investigator - Enhanced MRDA may request up to 40% effort across 6 months.
- II. **Academic investigators** with scientific or engineering backgrounds who are seeking to develop clinical/translational research proposals can receive coverage for expenses for up to 10% faculty buyout (i.e., 0.6 calendar months) or release from one course during one semester. *Those qualifying for an Academic Investigator - Enhanced MRDA may request expenses for up to 20% faculty buyout (i.e., 1.2 calendar months) or release from one course for each of two semesters or two courses during one semester.
- III. **Clinical or academic investigators** who have sufficient protected time to write their grant proposal and participate in ACCEL activities but who lack other substantive grant-writing support may request funds to cover costs up to \$10,000 related to increasing the competitiveness of the grant proposal they are writing. In these cases, MRDA funds can support, for example: a) travel to meet with mentors and collaborators; b) attendance at conferences or workshops focused on the topic area of the grant or on grant writing; c) technical training or professional development activities; d) consultation regarding study design or data analysis, including payments to key informant advisory board members; e) resources or supplies (e.g., books, datasets) supporting the writing of a competitive grant submission; f) publication fees for related manuscripts; and g) grant editing. *Those qualifying for Funds but no Protected Time - Enhanced MRDA can request up to \$20,000.

*Please note that MRDA funds
CANNOT BE USED TO FUND RESEARCH ACTIVITIES.
All funds requested in lieu of effort should be described and justified in a
budget (see below).*

In addition to the support for awardees, Sponsoring Mentors who fully participate in the program will have access to a small amount of funding (~\$2,250) that can be requested for travel, education, or other activities / materials that support the broader goals of the ACCEL Program to increase clinical and translational research capacity at the participating institutions. Full mentor participation means that:

During the MRDA submission process, the Sponsoring Mentor will:

- i. Review and sign the Mentor and Mentee Expectations form to be uploaded with the preliminary application;
- ii. Complete/update their Mentoring Profile on the ACCEL website;

- iii. Complete a web-based Mentoring Plan specific to the MRDA applicant;
- iv. Write and upload a Letter of Support for the MRDA applicant in the application submission interface;
- v. Assist the applicant with the preparation of an initial Individual Development Plan and other components of the submission.

If the MRDA is awarded, the Sponsoring Mentor will:

- i. Attend a brief orientation meeting with a PDC leader (if new to the program);
- ii. Assure the conditions of the submitted Mentoring Plan are met;
- iii. Provide periodic online assessments of the MRDA recipient and their relationship with the mentor;
- iv. Participate in their mentee's Mentoring and Advisory Council (MAC) session and agree to act as a reviewer for a future MAC session.

Activities Covered

MRDAs are designed to support activities associated with writing and submitting highly competitive clinical and translational research grants. MRDAs CANNOT be used to support new research activities such as the enrollment of subjects or prospective data acquisition.

Examples of activities that are allowed under an MRDA include:

- i. Meet with mentors and collaborators;
- ii. Participate in PD Core grant development workshops, peer group sessions, and mock study sections;
- iii. Draft, refine, and finalize the specific aims and research strategy for a research grant submission;
- iv. Complete analysis of existing pilot data and prepare figures for a research grant submission;
- v. Determine best research methods and alternative approaches for the targeted grant submission;
- vi. Consult and collaborate with the ACCEL BERD Core to develop an effective study design and analytic approach for a research grant submission and an envisioned larger program of research;
- vii. Draft documents for Institutional Review Board consideration;
- viii. Respond to comments / suggestions from previous reviewers or from leaders in the field to whom a copy of your potential grant submission was sent for review.

Preliminary Application Requirements

A preliminary application must be submitted through the ACCEL site by September 11, 2026. Submission requires registration on the ACCEL site (www.de-ctr.org). Applications are submitted through the ACCEL dashboard (<https://dash.de-ctr.org/auth/login>) under Funding > Funding Opportunities > Submit a Preliminary Application. You will be asked to provide the following:

- i. Demographic information that will help us characterize those who apply for the purpose of program analysis;
- ii. The type of grant proposal you will be writing during the MRDA and its due date (including a link to the Notice of Funding Opportunity or Request for Applications);
- iii. An overview of the research to be proposed in the targeted grant application;
- iv. The name, title, institution and email address of your Sponsoring Mentor and, if applicable, Mentoring Team members;
- v. IF APPLICABLE: how much effort offset is being requested and the name of the individual who will release you from clinical, teaching, or other responsibilities if the MRDA is awarded;
- vi. The desired start and end date for the MRDA activities. This RFA will support MRDAs beginning on or after January 1, 2027 and ending no later than June 30, 2027 (see Timeline below);
- vii. A Mentor and Mentee Expectations form signed by you and your Sponsoring Mentor.

This preliminary application will be used to assign appropriate reviewers and ensure your eligibility. You will not receive feedback on your plan; however, you will be contacted to collect additional information, as needed, and to discuss your planned submission in advance of the full application due date.

Proposal Requirements

Full applications are due by October 9, 2026. Applications are submitted through the ACCEL dashboard (<https://dash.de-ctr.org/auth/login>) under Funding > Funding Opportunities > Submit Proposal. Applications should be prepared by mentee-mentor pairs and BOTH the mentor and mentee will be evaluated as part of the review process. Applicants who have previously received an MRDA must provide documentation detailing the outcomes of their prior MRDA funding and explaining the need for additional support (please contact Julianne Ross for additional guidance).

Submission of applications is encouraged in advance of the October 9 deadline (preferably by September 28) so that if the initial application is found to be incomplete or inconsistent with the intent of the MRDA program, the investigator will have time to update the proposal and resubmit by the October 9 deadline. Awarded MRDA Scholars will be announced no later than November 17, 2026, and funding can start on or anytime after January 1, 2027 (see Timeline below).

Application Details

Applications should be prepared using 11pt Arial (or larger) font with 1/2 inch (or larger) margins. Applications must include the following sections:

- i. A *Research Summary* (no more than 2 pages) including:
 - a. Background and significance of the clinical/translational problem to be studied in the planned grant and a draft of your specific aims;
 - b. Overview of the methodology to be used;
 - c. Long-term research goals and potential impact of the line of research being developed by the applicant;
 - d. The specific target funding agency (e.g., ACCEL, NIH, NSF, AHA), funding mechanism name and number (e.g., pilot grant, R21, CAREER Award, Grant-in-Aid), and grant submission deadline.
- ii. An *MRDA Plan and Timeline* (no more than 2 pages) including:
 - a. The amount and duration of effort requested (percent effort/months or course release/semester) -OR- the amount of funds requested and an overview of how it will be spent (details will be provided in a Budget Request as described below);
 - b. An overview of planned MRDA activities and a description of resources readily available to the applicant to ensure attainment of the MRDA objectives (e.g., mentoring team, collaborators, analytical tools, ACCEL resources, grant readers/reviewers). Please specify the frequency and duration of meetings with your Mentor(s);
 - c. A detailed timeline of planned MRDA activities beginning with initiation of the MRDA work and ending with submission of the targeted grant. Submissions for this call should propose an MRDA start date on or after July 1, 2026. MRDA activities should be built into SMART goals (See: <https://www.niehs.nih.gov/careers/research/fellows/career/individual/create/index.cfm>) with plans and deadlines related to activities such as talking to a Program Officer, completing the first draft of the Aims page, completing the first draft of the Approach, getting feedback on and revising drafts, requesting a Mentoring and Advisory Council (MAC) Mock review, etc.
- iii. If requesting funds for MRDA type III (IF NOT REQUESTING EFFORT OFFSET): A *Draft Budget Request with Justification* including:
 - a. An itemized list of each non-salary related request (e.g., travel, trainings, services, fees);
 - b. The direct cost for each entry;
 - c. A justification for each entry (emphasizing impact on grant competitiveness);
 - d. The total direct costs requested.

Other Submission Requirements

- i. Completion of an *Individual Development Plan (IDP)*: (<https://dash.de-ctr.org/profiles/idp/overview>).
- ii. Uploading of NIH-formatted Biosketches for the MRDA candidate, the sponsoring mentor, and any other mentors or collaborators who would play a significant role in accomplishing the goals of the MRDA. These Biosketches MUST be in NIH format (<https://grants.nih.gov/grants/forms/biosketch.htm>). SciENCv

certified Biosketches will be accepted but are not required at this time. **The Biosketches of the mentors should describe their experiences as mentors and why they are appropriate mentors for this applicant and this research plan.**

- iii. A Mentoring Plan developed by the Sponsoring Mentor and MRDA applicant completed in the ACCEL web portal and Support Letters from each of the Mentors named on the application. These letters should detail the candidate's potential, the nature of any existing mentoring relationship with the candidate, and specifics as to how often the Mentor will interact with the candidate during the MRDA funding period and the goals of those interactions.
- iv. A letter provided by the applicant's Division Chief and/or Department Chair confirming support for the applicant's participation in the MRDA program and **providing assurance that the applicant currently has adequate protected time or will be released from clinical, teaching, or other responsibilities for the amount of time and duration requested**, consistent with the Timeline specified, should the MRDA application be approved.
 - If effort offset is not requested, the letter must:**
 - a. detail the support requested (e.g., attendance at a specific conference, etc.)
 - b. clearly describe the applicant's need for the requested resources.
 - If an effort offset is requested, the letter must:**
 - a. acknowledge that, if awarded, the MRDA will be used to offset clinical, teaching or other non-research effort and will not be used to cover time already released for research, free time spent on research, or time spent on days off;
 - b. clearly state the specific time release for the MRDA activities (i.e., % effort and number of months; number of courses and number of semesters)
 - c. IF APPLICANT IS A CLINICIAN INVESTIGATOR: indicate agreement to split the MRDA-associated salary costs with the ACCEL Program.
- v. Applicants who have received a previous MRDA must provide a *Progress Report* document detailing:
 - a. the outcomes of their previous MRDA funding (e.g., grant funding, publications, presentations)
 - b. a detailed explanation of the need for additional MRDA support
- vi. Prior to funding, all MRDA awardees and Sponsoring Mentors will sign a compact agreeing to:
 - a. Adhere to the Mentoring Plan conditions;
 - b. Protect the awardee's research time based on the MRDA timeline proposed;
 - c. Maintain communication with the PD Core (e.g., mid-MRDA and post-MRDA check-ins).

Merit Review Criteria

The following criteria will be used to evaluate the merit of the proposal:

- i. The likelihood of the applicant's success in competing for an external grant based on the Mentor's assessment of the candidate's research potential and a review of the application materials (e.g., Research Plan, Biosketches).
- ii. The clarity, specificity (i.e., use of SMART goals), and scope of the MRDA Plan and the likelihood of successfully accomplishing the proposed objectives.
- iii. The availability of collaborators, core lab resources, analytical tools, and other relevant resources to support the applicant.
- iv. The feasibility of the proposed timeline to produce a competitive submission.
- v. The relevance of the envisioned grant proposal to the DE-CTR ACCEL mission. Although all meritorious applications will be considered for funding, in cases where multiple applications are ranked at the same level of merit, priority will be given to areas of emphasis defined by the DE-CTR ACCEL. We also encourage submissions describing Community Engagement Research and/or addressing Social Determinants of Health, Health Disparities/Equity, and Substance Use (e.g., the Opioid Epidemic). ACCEL prioritizes:
 - a. Projects addressing medically underserved populations
 - b. Projects addressing conditions disproportionately affecting Delawareans

Please note that priority will be given to those who have not previously been a recipient of an MRDA and those from groups historically underrepresented in biomedical research.

Individual Development Plan Review Criteria

Reviewers will assess whether the MRDA Plan is consistent with and will facilitate your career goals. A focus will be placed on your stated research goals (e.g., achieving external funding, launching a research program).

Mentoring Component Review Criteria

The following criteria will be used to evaluate the mentoring components of the application:

- i. The Sponsoring Mentor has appropriate experience as a mentor to junior faculty seeking research funding (e.g., past record of numerous successful mentees).
- ii. The mentor(s) is/are suitable for this project (topic area, study design/methods, involvement in proposal) and this mentee.
- iii. The Mentoring Plan is appropriate for this project and mentee, each mentor's role in the plan is clear, and each mentor is devoting enough time to the professional development of the mentee to accomplish the MRDA Plan.

MRDA Submission, Review, and Required Activities Timeline

| Due Date | Action |
|-----------------------------|--|
| September 11, 2026 | Preliminary Applications are due |
| October 9, 2026 | Full Proposals are due for Mentoring Oversight Committee review |
| November 17, 2026 | Funding decisions will be made by the Executive Committee and awardees will be announced |
| On or after January 1, 2027 | MRDA Scholars will be admitted to the MRDA program; scholars may begin work |
| June 30, 2027 | Work on all MRDAs must be completed |

Comments or Questions about the MRDA program?
Contact the PDC at Mentoring@de-ctr.org.

Work supported by an Institutional Development Award (IDeA) from the National Institute of General Medical Sciences of the National Institutes of Health under grant number U54-GM104941 (PI: Hicks).

