

Melanoma

Research Alliance

2016-2017 REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

August 1, 2016

The Melanoma Research Alliance (MRA) is pleased to announce a Request for Proposals (RFP) for high-impact translational research that has the potential to lead to near-term clinical application in melanoma prevention, detection, diagnosis, staging, and treatment. This cycle, proposals will be accepted for Young Investigator Awards, Established Investigator Awards, Pilot Awards, and Academic-Industry Partnership Awards (for Established Investigators). MRA plans to support at least \$7 million in new funding during the 2016-2017 cycle.

INTRODUCTION

About Melanoma: Melanoma is a leading cause of new cancers, and more effective options for patients and those at risk are urgently needed. While research and treatment have advanced significantly in recent years, leading to the availability of immunotherapies and molecularly targeted therapies for patients, there is a significant need to develop new treatment approaches, to optimize the effectiveness of existing and emerging therapies, and to better prevent, detect and diagnose melanoma. From a basic and clinical research perspective, melanoma occupies the crossroads of molecular biology and immunology. Cutaneous melanomas can be queried at the earliest stages of carcinogenesis for molecular events or signatures predicting progression, invasion, and dissemination. As one of the most immunogenic human tumors, melanoma also provides an ideal context for understanding interactions between the human immune system and cancer. Recent therapeutic progress offers unprecedented means to explore melanoma in ways never before possible.

About the MRA: MRA is a public charity formed in 2007 under the auspices of the Milken Institute, with the generous founding support of Debra and Leon Black. The mission of MRA is to **end suffering and death due to melanoma** by collaborating with all stakeholders to accelerate powerful research, advance cures for all patients, and prevent more melanomas. To date the MRA has awarded more than \$79 million to research projects worldwide. Please visit www.curemelanoma.org for further information on MRA and the research projects funded in prior award cycles.

OBJECTIVE: *EMPHASIS ON TRANSLATIONAL SCIENCE*

MRA is soliciting proposals that address the gap in translational science (i.e., turning scientific discoveries into tools and/or treatments for high-risk individuals and melanoma patients). Successful proposals will offer the potential for translational development that could lead to high impact, near-term clinical application in melanoma detection, prevention, diagnosis, staging, or treatment.

Proposals for clinical investigations testing well-defined and clearly articulated hypotheses are welcome and should be accompanied by a brief protocol synopsis and timeline with milestones. IRB approval is not required at the time of application but is required before initial payments are made.

MRA welcomes proposals in the following areas:

- **Prevention:** Elucidation of environmental, epidemiological, and biological factors in melanomagenesis that lead to prevention strategies.
- **Detection, Diagnosis, and Staging:** Development of targeted screening methods and identification and validation of diagnostic and prognostic biomarkers.
- **Treatment:** Projects emphasizing the translation of scientific findings to new treatments for patients with melanoma. Examples include but are not limited to studies of melanoma immunotherapy, therapeutic applications based on molecular mechanisms involved in melanoma formation and/or progression, combination therapies, and development of novel biomarkers of response to therapy.

Special Emphasis Areas: For the 2016-2017 cycle, MRA seeks proposals in the following areas, which are focused on current unmet clinical needs in melanoma. These areas are of particular interest and will receive special consideration. These can include pre-clinical, clinical, and/or correlative scientific studies:

- 1) Addressing treatment failures or difficult-to-treat disease, which may include rare melanoma subtypes or metastatic brain disease, by undertaking studies leading to new targets and/or rational treatment approaches
- 2) Informing logical and optimal combination therapies, therapeutic sequences, or treatment regimens, including defining dose or duration of targeted and/or immunotherapies
- 3) Developing markers of response, resistance, or risk of recurrence or death in early stage disease to improve clinical decision-making and speed the development of new melanoma therapies in the neoadjuvant, adjuvant, or advanced setting
- 4) Identifying new targets, treatments, or biomarkers via the study of exceptional responders/non-responders and/or leveraging data (e.g. clinical, genomics, and immunologic) from within and outside melanoma

KEY REVIEW AND SELECTION CRITERIA

- **Innovative and transformative research:** Novel approaches with strong scientific rationale and clear capacity to revolutionize prevention, detection, diagnosis, staging, or treatment for patients with melanoma or for individuals at risk are encouraged.
- **Scientific merit:** Outstanding and rigorous proposals as determined by peer review.
- **Potential for rapid progression to clinical testing:** Proposals that articulate a clear path to near-term clinical application will be strongly favored.

APPLICANT ELIGIBILITY

Principal Investigators (PIs) must hold a full-time faculty appointment at the level of Assistant Professor (or equivalent) or above at an academic or other non-profit research institution within or outside the United States. Investigators need not be specifically trained in melanoma research, however, they should be working in an environment capable of conducting high-quality, high-impact melanoma research. PIs must be able to show clear evidence of an independent research program. Fellows or those in other training or research support positions are not eligible. Individuals employed by state or federal government agencies may participate in research proposals as non-funded collaborators, but may not apply for direct funding. If there are any questions about eligibility, please contact MRA before submitting an application. Applications from PIs who do not meet the eligibility criteria will not be reviewed.

An investigator may serve as PI on only one proposal submitted to MRA for any of the award mechanisms in this cycle. Multiple applications will be accepted from a single institution, provided that each application has a different PI and represents a distinct hypothesis.

TYPES OF AWARDS

All proposals are due on October 21, 2016 by 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time

AWARDS FOR YOUNG INVESTIGATORS

- **Young Investigator Awards:** Young Investigator Awards aim to attract early career scientists with novel ideas into the field of melanoma, thereby recruiting and supporting the next generation of melanoma research leaders. Awardees will be provided up to \$75,000 per year for three years (up to \$225,000 total) to accomplish innovative, translational research projects.

Applicants must be within four years of their first independent, full time academic faculty appointment at the time of application at the level of Assistant Professor (or equivalent position). Fellows or others who are in training are not eligible to apply. Those who are in research support positions are not eligible to apply. However, applications from those who have secured an independent full-time faculty position commencing by July 1, 2017 will be considered; in this case, a letter from an institutional official or department chairperson confirming the planned date of faculty appointment is required at the time of application. Any applicant not expected to hold an Assistant Professor position (e.g., Instructor or other title) by July 1, 2017 must contact MRA to confirm eligibility prior to submitting a proposal. To confirm eligibility, interested applicants must send an email, along with their CV, to Tasheema Prince, MRA Scientific Program Manager, at tprince@curemelanoma.org by October 14, 2016. Investigators who have been awarded a prior MRA Young Investigator Award are not eligible to apply for an additional MRA Young Investigator Award.

Young Investigator applicants must designate one Mentor, who is an established investigator at the same institution who will ensure that adequate support and guidance are provided for successful completion of the proposed research project. A support letter from the Mentor must be included in the application package and should confirm that the applicant has an independent research program and include a brief statement about the applicant, the Mentor's role, mentoring plan, the research environment, and sources of institutional support that the applicant will utilize in conducting the project.

AWARDS FOR ESTABLISHED INVESTIGATORS

- **Established Investigator Awards:** Investigators with an established record of scientific productivity will receive up to \$125,000 per year for two to three years (up to \$375,000 total) to conduct projects supported by preliminary data.
- **Pilot Awards:** Potentially transformative pilot studies from investigators who are past the initial four years of their first academic faculty appointment will be considered for an award of \$50,000 per year for two years (up to \$100,000 total). Pilot proposals are not required to contain extensive preliminary data, but must articulate a strong hypothesis and translational goals.

- **Established Investigator Academic-Industry Partnership Awards:** These awards are designed to enhance translational research by extending academic capabilities to clinical investigations and to facilitate interactions between the academic and industrial research sectors. These awards will be co-funded by MRA and an industry partner whose involvement is essential to the project. Investigators with an established record of scientific productivity will receive up to \$100,000 per year for two to three years (up to \$300,000 total) from MRA to conduct projects supported by preliminary data.

Industry funds and/or in-kind support (e.g., reagents, clinical grade drugs, equipment, contract services) must match but may exceed MRA funds for the award period. Industry scientists may serve as co-investigators or collaborators, but may not be PIs. Non-contract industry personnel costs may not be counted as in-kind support. Industry will negotiate contract terms directly with the PI's institution and will dispense its portion of the research funds directly to that institution.

In the event that an award is granted by MRA, both a finalized contract between the industry partner and the institution, as well as a letter agreement between the industry partner and MRA, must be executed within 90 days of the award date, before funds can be dispensed else MRA may withdraw its offer of award. Industry partners are encouraged to contact MRA regarding terms of the MRA-Industry Partner agreement prior to submission of the proposal.

Applications must include a letter of support from the industry partner, which should include at a minimum the following: 1) a description of the total amount of support, clearly indicating the portion that is monetary and/or in-kind, for the full term of the award (which must be at least 50% of the total support for the project); and 2) acknowledgement that if the award is made the industry partner will execute an agreement with the awardee Institution within 90 days.

Any questions about this can be directed to Tasheema Prince, MRA Scientific Program Manager, at tprince@curemelanoma.org.

APPLICATION FORMAT AND INSTRUCTIONS

All applications are due no later than October 21, 2016 at 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time. Proposals will not be considered after the deadline. Applicants must utilize the proposalCENTRAL on-line application tool at <https://proposalcentral.altum.com/> and the document templates and requirements therein. Please carefully follow the instructions in proposalCENTRAL and below. The application consists of the following components:

1. **Title Page:** Enter the project title
2. **Templates and Instructions:** Download RFP and templates
3. **Enable Other Users to Access this Proposal:** Allow others (e.g., institutional administrators or collaborators) to view, edit, or submit your proposal
4. **Applicant/PI:** Key information about the applicant PI
5. **Organization/Institution:** Key information about the PI's institution, including name and email address of the signing official who, in addition to the PI, will be contacted if the award is selected for funding
6. **Key Personnel:** List and provide contact information for key persons. For Young Investigator Award applicants, a Mentor from the same institution is required

7. **Abstracts and Keywords:** Provide a general audience abstract (non-technical) and a technical abstract (2,000 characters maximum each) and key words. Please note: the general audience abstract will become public if the award is selected for funding, therefore, it should not contain any proprietary information.
8. **Budget Period Detail:** Enter budget detail for each award period requested. **MRA will not support indirect costs, overhead costs, or other similar institutional charges.** Fringe benefits for personnel salaries are allowable. Academic-Industry Partnership Award proposals should contain the complete budget for the project, which includes both the MRA and industry partner contributions (direct costs only).
9. **Budget Summary and Justification:** A summary of the budget detail will be shown in this step. In addition, provide sufficient detail for the evaluation of the major portions of the budget that are being requested. If more space is required than is provided in the proposalCENTRAL forms (2,000 characters), applicants may upload the budget justification in document form in step # 11. For Academic-Industry Partnership Award proposals: The amount of funding anticipated solely from MRA must be **clearly indicated** in the Budget Justification.
10. **Organizational Assurances:** IRB and IACUC approvals, if applicable.
11. **Upload Attachments:** Upload the following:
 - a. **Curriculum vitae for PI and key personnel:** Applicants may use the template provided or the NIH biosketch format.
 - b. **Current and pending research support for the PI:** Use the template provided in proposalCENTRAL, which includes a statement of overlap. Any overlap of current or pending support with the MRA proposal must be described and explained.
 - c. **Project description:** Must be formatted in **Arial 11 point or Times New Roman 12 point font with no less than ½ inch margins.** The project description should be **5 pages maximum**, inclusive of the following: Background and specific aims, preliminary data, experimental design and methods, figures (which may be embedded within the above sections), and rationale/fit with key criteria, including the potential for clinical impact.
 - d. **Literature references:** A list of up to 20 references supporting the project description is allowed, in addition to the 5-page project description
 - e. **For Young Investigators Award proposals:** Include a letter of support from an established scientific Mentor at the same institution, who is familiar with the applicant and his/her work and will provide guidance and support for the project. The Mentor's letter should confirm that the applicant has an independent research program and include a brief statement about the applicant, the Mentor's role, mentoring plan, the research environment, and sources of institutional support that the applicant will utilize in conducting the project.
 - f. **For Academic-Industry Partnership Award proposals:** Include a letter of support from the industry partner, which should include at a minimum:
 - i. A description of the total amount of support, clearly indicating the portion that is monetary and/or in-kind, for the full term of the award (which must be at least 50% of the total support for the project)
 - ii. Acknowledgement that if the Award is made the industry partner will execute an agreement with the awardee Institution within 90 days

- iii. Acknowledgement that if the Award is made the industry partner will execute an agreement with MRA within 90 days. An example template agreement may be requested from MRA. Any questions about this can be directed to Tasheema Prince, MRA Scientific Program Manager at tprince@curemelanoma.org.
 - g. **For proposals involving clinical trials:** Attach a brief protocol synopsis (5 pages maximum), along with a **timeline and milestones**, including but not limited to IRB and regulatory approval (if applicable), patient accrual timeline, and timeline for completion of analyses
12. **Validate:** Check for any missing required information
 13. **Signature Page(s):** Print the signature page, which must be signed by the PI and the institution's signing official, and uploaded as part of the application package
 14. **Submit:** Please note that no proposals will be able to be submitted past their deadline. Technical support for the on-line application system is not available after 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time.

TIMELINE

Application deadlines conclude at 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time. Proposals submitted after the deadline will not be considered.

- October 14, 2016: For Young Investigators: Deadline to confirm eligibility with MRA for applicants who do not have an 'Assistant Professor' title
- **October 21, 2016:** Young Investigator Award, Established Investigator Award, Pilot Award, and Academic-Industry Partnership Award proposals are due
- November-February 2017: Peer review and organizational review
- March 2017: Awardees notified (Note: MRA may adjust the notification date without notice to applicants)
- May 2017: Projects start

REVIEW MECHANISM

All proposals will undergo rigorous peer review by the MRA Grant Review Committee (GRC), comprised of experts in diverse areas of translational cancer research. Applications will be scored according to MRA Key Criteria. All awards are contingent upon ratification by the MRA Board of Directors. **MRA will not provide reviewer critiques or evaluations to applicants, with the exception of Young Investigator applicants; Young Investigator applicants whose proposals are discussed by the MRA GRC will receive brief commentary.** Verbal feedback is available from MRA upon request to those PIs whose proposals are discussed by the MRA GRC. A listing of GRC membership and descriptions of the projects funded in 2008-2016 are provided on our website, www.curemelanoma.org.

COLLABORATIVE FUNDING OFFERS

For outstanding research proposals as determined by peer review that fall outside MRA's funding pay-line, MRA may seek co-funding from applicant institutions in order to support these proposals. MRA will reserve \$1 million for this Collaborative Funding program this cycle.

For proposals that meet the above criteria, MRA will contact the institutions for this Collaborative Funding offer, and institutions will be asked to decline or accept this offer within 14 days. Signed agreements between MRA and the institution will be required within 30 days.

AWARD ADMINISTRATION

AWARD LETTER

Upon acceptance of the award, the PI and his/her employing Institution will be required to sign an Award Letter indicating acceptance of the MRA's Award Terms and Conditions within 30 days (copy available in advance upon request). MRA must be notified in advance and approve of any significant changes in research objectives, key personnel, or budget. For Academic-Industry Partnership Awards, within 90 days the partnering company will be required to sign a letter agreement with MRA and the institution will be required to sign the Award Letter with MRA and finalize their agreement with the industry partner within 90 days.

APPROVALS

MRA requires certification through proposalCENTRAL of compliance with Human Subjects and Animal Care Assurance as applicable. In cases where ethical/regulatory approval is required to perform the work, such approvals will be required before initial payments are made. This includes local IRB approvals of clinical trials supported by MRA funding. For clinical trials, a timeline and milestones must be included in the application package. Failure to meet these milestones within a reasonable time frame may result in termination of the award.

MULTI-INSTITUTIONAL PROJECTS

For projects including key personnel at other institutions, the PI must verify in advance that funds can be transferred from their institution to the collaborating institution. This requirement can be easily met by attaching a letter from the PI's sponsored programs office stating a commitment to comply with this requirement. Sub-award agreements between collaborating institutions must be executed within 60 days of MRA's execution of the award agreement with the applicant institution.

FUNDING

For all proposals, the level and duration of funding may be adjusted by MRA as appropriate for the scope of the proposal and the funds available. Partial funding will also be considered to obtain proof-of-principle data in support of innovative ideas with transformative potential. **MRA will not support indirect costs, overhead costs, or other similar institutional charges;** however, fringe benefits for personnel salaries are allowable. **Full-term funding will be contingent upon review of annual progress reports and other oversight activities conducted by MRA.** Multi-year support is not automatic for any MRA award and is conditioned on submission of complete and accurate progress reports and demonstrated progress on the funded proposal.

MRA SCIENTIFIC RETREAT

PIs and, in the case of Academic-Industry Partnership Awards, industry partners will be invited to attend the annual MRA Scientific Retreat. PIs are expected to attend and may be asked to present research findings made under their awards at these meetings.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Eligibility

- Q: Must PIs have an academic faculty appointment? Is this a hard-and-fast rule?
- A: PIs must have a full-time appointment at an academic or non-profit research institution at the level of ‘Assistant Professor’ (or equivalent) or above; however, while a tenure-track is preferred, it is not required. Evidence of independent investigator status and an environment conducive and supportive of translational research is required. If there is any doubt or question about a PI’s eligibility, please contact MRA (contacts provided in this RFP) before an application is submitted. Applications from PIs who do not fit the eligibility criteria will not be reviewed. Young Investigator applicants who do not hold an Assistant Professor title must contact MRA to verify their eligibility prior to submitting a proposal (see additional FAQs for Young Investigators below).
- Q: Does MRA fund investigators and institutions outside of the United States?
- A: Yes. Investigators at institutions outside of the United States are eligible. PIs must be at the level of ‘Assistant Professor’ or equivalent. Academic appointments of institutions outside of the U.S. can differ from those traditionally found in the U.S. Contact MRA if there are any questions about eligibility prior to submitting a proposal.

Young Investigator Awards

- Q: I will be past the first four years of my first faculty appointment at the time the project starts. May I apply to the Young Investigator Award?
- A: Applicants should be within the first four years of their first faculty appointment at the time of proposal submission.
- Q: I will be past the first four years of my first faculty appointment at the time of application but I took time off for personal, family or professional reasons. Does this count against eligibility?
- A: If an applicant took leave of absence for family or medical leave or other personal or professional reasons, please inquire to MRA about eligibility. An appropriately documented leave of absence will not be counted in the four years of eligibility. Leaves of absence may include: military service (that does not include research training/experience), family leave, and maternity leave.
- Q: I am a Fellow at an academic institution. Am I eligible to apply for the Young Investigator Award?
- A: Generally, no, unless Fellow title is at least equivalent to Assistant Professor position (which is sometimes the case outside of the U.S.). Those in training positions are not eligible. Only those with a faculty level appointment will be considered. Young Investigator Award applicants who do not hold an ‘Assistant Professor’ title must contact MRA to verify their eligibility prior to submitting a proposal (see contact information in this RFP).
- Q: What is the role of the Mentor?
- A: It is expected that Young Investigators are independent faculty members and not in training or in research support positions. However, a Mentor is required to help ensure that the Young Investigator has the resources they need to successfully carry out the work at their institution.

- Q: I would like to have a Mentor that is not at my institution. Is this allowed?
- A: No. All Young Investigator Award applicants must have a designated Mentor at their institution to help to ensure that the Young Investigator has the resources they need to successfully carry out the work at their institution. An applicant may have other mentors outside of their institution for other purposes, including providing scientific guidance for the project, but will not be considered a Mentor for the award.
- Q: Are Mentors of Young Investigator Award applicants allowed to be a PI of an existing MRA award or award application this cycle?
- A: Yes.
- Q: Is there a minimum level of effort for the Mentor?
- A: No.

Academic-Industry Partnership Awards

- Q: How are partnerships between academic scientists and industry formed?
- A: It is the responsibility of the academic scientist to find an industrial partner whose involvement and collaboration will be vital to conducting the research project, or vice versa. However, applicants interested in this mechanism are welcome to seek MRA's guidance on potential industry partners.
- Q: In the application budget, do I itemize expenses associated with only the request from MRA or the total budget from both MRA and industry?
- A: The overall budget should contain all costs associated with the project including contributions from both MRA and the industrial partner, and the expected contributions from each should be clearly explained in the Budget Justification. The value of in-kind support from industry should be estimated in U.S. Dollars. The amount of funding solely requested from MRA should also be clearly indicated in the Budget Justification.

Collaborative Funding Program

- Q: Is my institution's willingness to participate in the Collaborative Funding Program going to affect my score?
- A: No. Scientific merit evaluation by MRA's Grant Review Committee will not be influenced by any co-funding or collaborative funding support. Only those proposals that are deemed outstanding by peer review but fall below MRA's pay line will be considered for this program. The collaborative funding process will be conducted after the scientific review process has been completed.

Application components

- Q: How are proposals submitted? Do I need to send a hard copy?
- A: All proposals must be submitted electronically via proposalCENTRAL, <https://proposalcentral.altum.com>. The signature page should be signed and a scanned PDF copy be uploaded as part of the application in proposalCENTRAL. Hard copies will not be accepted.
- Q: Does MRA require the NIH salary cap to be used when calculating salary and fringe benefit requests for the budget?
- A: No, but applicants may use it at their discretion.

Q: What needs to be included in the “Current and Pending Support” section?

A: Please submit a listing of all sponsored research support for the effort of the PI that is active or pending (submitted or awarded by a research sponsor but not yet started). Include the name of the title of the project, research sponsor, total annual funding, start and end dates, and percent of committed time. For each project, you must include a statement of overlap or non-overlap with the MRA proposal. A template is provided in proposalCENTRAL.

Q: Is the NIH biosketch CV format acceptable for submission to MRA?

A: Yes, you may use your NIH biosketch or the template provided in proposalCENTRAL.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND CONTACTS

Email questions about this RFP, eligibility, or other issues about MRA or its awards to Tasheema Prince, MRA Scientific Program Manager at tprince@curemelanoma.org.

Technical questions about the proposalCENTRAL submission system should be directed to their customer support at 800-875-2562 (Toll-free U.S. and Canada), +1 703-964-5840 (Direct Dial International) or by email at pcsupport@altum.com.