

Request for Applications

CU Anschutz Programmatic Incubator for Research (CU ASPIRE) Program

Overview

The University of Colorado School of Medicine and Cancer Center are pleased to partner on this effort to foster the development of interdisciplinary, programmatic research on the CU Anschutz campus. The goal of the CU ASPIRE Program is to increase submission and success of large multi-PI grants (>\$750,000 direct funds per year), including program projects, center proposals, NCI SPOREs, multi-project team science programs, and multiple PI grants on campus by supporting milestone-driven collaborations between investigators across campus. The CU ASPIRE Program is designed to facilitate interdisciplinary team science and collaborative research groups on the Anschutz Medical Campus working on unmet needs in basic and translational science or clinical medicine that can only be addressed by a team of investigators.

During the funding period, the investigative group is anticipated to:

- Establish preliminary findings to support the unifying scientific theme of the program, including joint publications.
- Develop a plan to programmatically integrate the investigators, projects, and cores as appropriate.
- Communicate with the appropriate funding agency and establish a timeline and plan for grant proposal submission.

The anticipated outcome of the milestone-driven CU ASPIRE Program is an external grant application to the NIH, DOD, or other external public or private funding agencies, focused on team science and collaborative research.

Funding will be awarded up to \$50K/year for 1-2 years for an 'incubation period' during which the team collects preliminary data and prepares the grant application. If the proposal is successful and funded, the team will receive an additional \$100K upon receipt of the NOA (notice of award) from the external funding agency. Allowable grant mechanisms include MPI R01, P series awards, and U-type grants from the NIH, or equivalent grants from other external funding agencies (i.e. DOD) that will bring in greater than \$750K in direct costs annually.

ASPIRE program funding may be used for research support (such as supplies and PRA salaries) to generate collaborative preliminary data, to purchase essential equipment that will be used jointly by the multiple investigators, or to support joint publications. Funding may not be used for salary support for investigators, conferences, or travel (unless approved by the CU ASPIRE Program).

Successful applications will include 2-5 investigators with complementary scientific backgrounds that are focused on solving a complex unmet need in basic and translational science or clinical medicine and are interdisciplinary by design. The PI must have a primary appointment in a Department within the School of Medicine. The team can include investigators solely from the School of Medicine but may also include project leads and other investigators with primary appointments in different CU Anschutz Schools/Colleges (Medicine, Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Dental Medicine, Nursing or Public Health), departments, or divisions. Preference will be given to investigative teams that have a history of prior collaboration.

Eligibility Criteria

General Eligibility Criteria

- PI must have a primary appointment in a Department in the School of Medicine.
- At least 2 and no more than 5 investigators are required as part of the application, including one Principal Investigator.
- To be competitive, PI and project leads must have secured R01-level funding.
- Up to two investigators may be included from an institution outside of the University of Colorado.
- Individuals from traditionally under-represented communities are strongly encouraged to apply.

Awardee Obligations and Anticipated Outcomes

- Research must be focused on an unmet need in basic and translational science or clinical medicine that can only be addressed by a team of investigators. This focused research effort must be built around a scientific hypothesis.
- The interdisciplinary research group should operate with the goals of:
 - Establishing preliminary findings to support the unifying scientific theme of the program, including joint publications.
 - Developing a plan to programmatically integrate the investigators, projects, and cores if appropriate.
 - Identifying a funding agency and establish a timeline and plan for grant submission of a program project, center, or multiple-PI R01 level grant (> \$750K direct) application in 1-2 years.
- This is a milestone-driven program with continued funding dependent on progress to programmatic research. Progress will be evaluated every 6 months.
- After Year 1 of funding, project teams will present their progress to program leadership and other relevant scientists, outlining overall progress and achievement of milestones, including progress towards submission of a program project/center/MPI R01 grant application. Year 2 funding will be contingent on progress during Year 1, and only some ASPIRE projects will be funded for 2 years.

Submission Process: Letter of Intent and Application Requirements

Letter of Intent

A Letter of Intent must be submitted using the SmartSheet link provided below by **Monday, November 2, 2026**:

<https://app.smartsheet.com/b/form/0198e1780c607e6dbd37498f81069d89>

The Letter of Intent must include the following:

- Names and Primary Appointments of Principal Investigator and Project Lead investigators
- Email Address of Principal Investigator
- ASPIRE Application Title
- Brief Description of Anticipated Topic (approximately 100-150 words)
- Identify potential external funder for the ultimate collaborative research grant application

Please note: This is a non-competitive Letter of Intent. It will not factor into the review of the subsequent application. The information collected will allow the ASPIRE team to estimate the application review workload and identify appropriate reviewers for the study section.

Full Applications

A link to submit the full application will be sent out to those who submitted a Letter of Intent that is approved to move forward. Applications must be submitted by **January 11, 2027**. Applications should use 11-point font; .5-inch margins. Each of the documents listed below must be uploaded as a single, combined PDF.

- **Title page:** including contact information and 200-word abstract focusing on the significance of the unmet need in basic science or clinical medicine.
- **Specific Aims (1 page):** The Specific Aims page should include an overview of the proposal, overall scientific goal and hypothesis, critical components of the proposal, and how support of this proposal is expected to lead to an external large multi-PI grant.
- **Research plan (5 pages):** The research plan should emphasize how the proposed project/program will result in scientific progress that is more than the sum of the parts. Recommended structure includes the following components:
 - Overall research goal, rationale for the project/program, and scientific hypothesis

- Significance of the scientific theme, programmatic integration of the team, potential impact of the research, and innovation
- Description of anticipated projects and cores (if appropriate)
- **Investigators (1 page):** summarize the role of each investigator, their accomplishments, and evidence of previous collaboration between the investigators.
- **Path to external funding (0.5 page):** describe how the two years of funding will lead to submission of a program project, center grant, or MPI R01 or similar grant application in 2 years. Indicate target funding agency and mechanism, and describe any communications you have already had with a funding representative.
- **NIH Biosketch for each investigator:** combined into a single PDF
- **NIH Other Support document for each investigator:** combined into a single PDF
- **Letters of Support:** Up to 3 letters of support may be included but are not required.
- **References:** No page limit.
- **Budget and budget justification:** Please include your budget plans for funding up to \$50,000/year for 1-2 years of support. Funding may not be used for salary support for investigators, support conferences, or travel (unless specifically approved by the CU ASPIRE Program). No indirect costs are allowed.

*Please note - appendices will **not be accepted**.

Evaluation Criteria

Applications will be evaluated by an ad hoc committee of non-conflicted CU Anschutz Medical campus faculty utilizing a NIH-style study section review process.

Reviewers will evaluate applications based on:

- Scientific merit, including significance of scientific theme
- Programmatic and collaborative integration of scientific team
- Prior productivity of scientific team members
- Likelihood of project leading to scientific accomplishments and external funding in 2 years
- Clear identification of an appropriate funding agency
- Applications should demonstrate how the proposed structure of the expected external funding application will enable the scientific goals to be achieved.

Progress Reporting

Awardees will be expected to meet with program leadership (or internal advisory board) every 3 months to discuss progress and potential challenges. Additional progress reporting will be required as described above under Awardee Obligations.

Key Dates

- **Letter of intent due date:** Monday, November 2, 2026
- **Invitation to submit full application:** Friday, November 20, 2026
- **Full application due date (submit single, combined PDF):** Monday, January 11, 2027

Program Contacts:

Questions regarding program:

Jennifer T. Kemp, PhD (jennifer.t.kemp@cuanschutz.edu)

Questions regarding application process:

Sarah Miller (sarah.h.miller@cuanschutz.edu)

CU ASPIRE Program Director: David Schwartz, MD (david.schwartz@cuanschutz.edu)

CU ASPIRE Program Co-Director: Lori Sussel, PhD (lori.sussel@cuanschutz.edu)