

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA  
OFFICE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH

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

### Request for Proposals

Application Deadline Date:	March 19, 2025
Award Announcement Date:	June 11, 2025

**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 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. An applicant may request a project period of 15 months beginning July 1. Under certain conditions and with justification, exceptions to these dates may be requested.

**Budget Information:** It is *required* to use the [budget and budget justification forms here \(with instructions\)](#) or 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 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*)
- Animal maintenance
- Travel essential to conduct the project; strong justification must be provided.
- Graduate Student Tuition

## Unallowable Costs

- Travel to professional meetings, conferences, etc.
- Food (for use in research, as subject 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-PIs, if the research is theoretical or applied, the total budget requested, and a brief summary of the proposed work. Also include what area your application is based (ex: AI Healthcare, AI STEM, AI Social Sciences, AI Humanities, etc.)
2. Proposal Narrative\*: Maximum of 5 pages; To include
  - a. A brief discussion of the background and significance of the proposed AI research, 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 task 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 criteria below, the narrative must be written in language clearly comprehensible to academic scholars outside the applicant's field of study.*

3. Bibliography (should be included as appropriate; no page limit)
4. CV/resume\* (max 2 pages for each faculty member – PI and co-PIs) that includes:
  - Education
  - Professional experience
  - Evidence of scholarship: most significant refereed journal articles, books, and 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 Include current, pending, submitted, and to-be-submitted grant funding and requests for funding (internal and external support) using [this form](#) (also on the program website).
  - Separate form needed for each PI and co-PI
  - Form is required even if you have no other support; mark “no other grant support”
  - 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 here \(with instructions\)](#) or found 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 If you have received funding from the Office of the Vice President for Research in the past (not including SPARC or Magellan awards), you must include a brief appendix to your proposal that includes the titles and funding amounts of these awards, along with a description of the impacts of the award(s).

**Submission:** Combine all of 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 review panel. Reviewers will prioritize their recommendations based on the quality of the proposals in accordance with the review criteria below. Recommendations will be reviewed by the VPR, who will make final funding decisions.

Research Merit:

- Does the proposal provide a compelling argument for the funding?
- Does the proposed project represent a significant contribution to both AI and the investigator's field of study? If so, how?

Nature of Proposal:

- Does the proposal provide a clear statement of overall project objectives?
- Are the proposed methodologies appropriate and accurate?
- Is the AI approach appropriate and feasible?
- Does the proposal provide a sound justification with clear and specific budget information? Is there a timeline, and is it realistic?
- Is the text clearly comprehensible to other academic scholars, some of whom may not be experts in the applicant's field of study?

Leverage:

- Does it significantly improve chances for funding from existing sources?
- Does the project offer significant opportunities for funding from new sources?
- Does the project help build research networks?

**For questions,** please contact Julie Morris, Program Coordinator, [jamorris@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:jamorris@mailbox.sc.edu), 803-563-8376.