



The Houston Nutrition Obesity Research Center (HNORC) Pilot/Feasibility Program 2025-2026 Application Instructions

Date: December 1, 2025

To: Baylor College of Medicine Faculty
The University of Texas Health Science Center Faculty
MD Anderson Cancer Center Faculty HNORC
Members

From: HNORC Executive and Internal Advisory Committee:

David Allison, PhD	Mark Herman, MD
Benjamin Arenkiel, PhD	Mikhail Kolonin, PhD
Christie Ballantyne, MD	Samer Mattar, MD
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Subject: Instructions for Application — Funding for Pilot/Feasibility Projects

The Houston Nutrition and Obesity Research Center (HNORC) is pleased to announce the availability of funds to provide seed money for pilot/feasibility (P/F) projects in obesity and nutrition-related research. These funds will be awarded on a competitive basis. We anticipate funding two to four projects up to \$50,000 each (direct costs only – indirect costs waived). Project support is provided in part by NIH P30DK144025.

A Notice of Intent must be submitted by 5:00 pm CST on Monday, December 8, 2025. The full application is due at 5:00 PM CST on Monday, January 5, 2026.

The awards will be for one year. The earliest starting date for awards is March 1, 2026.

The overall theme of the HNORC is to investigate the molecular pathogenesis and treatment of obesity and associated diseases, as well as the role of nutrition in metabolic disease.

Proposed pilot projects should relate to this theme.

ELIGIBILITY

All full-time faculty members at HNORC consortium institutions are eligible to apply. This includes full-time faculty members at BCM, UTHealth Houston, UT Medical Branch, MD Anderson, Houston Methodist Research Institute, Institute of Biosciences and Technology at TAMU, Rice University, and University of Houston. Applicants must be a member or associate member of HNORC. Please use this Membership link to apply for membership. Trainees may apply and will need a commitment from a senior scientist to sponsor their project and assurance of future faculty appointment from their Section/Dept Head. Applicants for pilot projects are not required to be United States citizens or possess a permanent resident visa. Funding preference will be given to early-career faculty. The purpose of these grants is to help early-career investigators establish an independent research program and to encourage the involvement of established investigators not currently working in the areas of nutrition and obesity research. **If unsure about the relevance of the proposed research, it is recommended that prospective applicants contact one of the HNORC Directors (listed above).**

Funds are not meant to be used for training purposes but may support the following.

- **New Investigator (N):** Investigators without current or past NIH support at the level of R01, K08, K01, and K23 recipients are eligible and are encouraged to apply. Trainees who are recipients of an NRSA individual award (F32) or are supported by an institutional training grant (T32) are eligible for P/F funds, if they are in their last year of training, have had at least one year of research laboratory experience, and have suitable expertise and independence to design and carry out the planned experiments.
- **Established Investigator New to Digestive Diseases Research (NTF):** Established Investigators from other areas of biomedical research who intend to use their expertise for nutrition or obesity-related research.

A notice of intent (NOI) is required for any interested application. NOIs are due by Monday, December 8, 2025, via our online system and will be reviewed for funding eligibility. Any applicant, who does **NOT** meet the minimum qualifications to apply will be contacted before December 22, 2025. All other applicants are encouraged to move forward with their full application.

If the PI of the Pilot/Feasibility project has not had a previous major federally funded grant, the PI should identify a mentor. The mentor should provide a letter describing a mentoring plan, the mentor's commitment to the individual, and an evaluation of the project. **All early-career faculty and trainee applicants must have at least 50% protected time for research if the project is funded.**

The pilot/feasibility funds are meant to permit preliminary assessment of new ideas. An application is not eligible if the proposed work has been previously supported by external, major peer-reviewed funding. If an application to external granting agencies on the same work is currently pending and is subsequently awarded, any approved and unspent HNORC funds must be returned at the time the external grant is activated.

An important goal of the HNORC pilot/feasibility program is to get early-career investigators connected with other HNORC faculty and foster increased involvement of the PI in HNORC activities, such as the regular HNORC seminar series and symposium. We expect all P/F awardees to become involved and attend these HNORC training activities on a regular basis.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION OF APPLICATIONS

The criteria used in evaluating an application are the same as those generally applied in competition for funding at the national level:

1. The novelty and significance of the basic or clinical information being sought
2. Its relevance to nutrition and obesity-related research
3. Rationale for the premise
4. Validity and adequacy of the approach
5. Feasibility for a 1-year proposal
6. Collaboration with one or more HNORC cores
7. The probability that the project will lead to a grant application for external funding
8. The potential for translation between clinical and basic science
9. The scientific expertise of the applicant to perform the proposed research

For early career faculty and senior postdoctoral fellows, there must be a mentoring plan outlining your primary mentor, plans to obtain independent funding, and how you intend to become actively involved in the HNORC. An individual who wishes to carry out a project for which he/she lacks technical expertise should obtain that expertise by collaborating with other scientists within the Texas Medical Center, and a letter of collaboration should be included in the application. Applicants are encouraged to consult members of the HNORC Leadership and Internal Advisory Committee for advice on preparing these applications. Applicants should also seek guidance from applicable HNORC Core Directors involving their projects.

NOTICE OF INTENT

All people interested in applying should initially submit a Notice of Intent with a tentative application title, the name of the PI, any co-PIs, and their affiliations via the online system. If you have questions regarding the HNORC Pilot Awards, please email HNORC-Admin@bcm.edu. The online system will be made available by December 1, 2025.

The Notice of Intent must be submitted using the online system by 5:00 pm on Monday, December 8, 2025.

A notice of intent is required for any interested applicant. Notice of Intents will be reviewed for funding eligibility. Any applicant, who does **NOT** meet the minimum qualifications to apply, will be contacted before December 22, 2025. All other applicants are encouraged to move forward with their full application. **If you are unsure of eligibility, please contact Kristin Eckel-Mahan, Ph.D., at kristin.l.mahan@uth.tmc.edu.**

FORMAT OF THE APPLICATION

The body of the grant must be no more than two (2) single-spaced pages. Applicants should follow NIH grant application formatting with standard type of 11-point font size (no more than 15 characters per inch) and margins of one-half inch (0.5") on all sides. One additional HNORC summary sheet page is required. Each application must contain the following items:

1. **Summary Sheet** (HNORC form attached) (1 page). This will be given to all reviewers.
2. **Budget:** Provide a budget (NIH PHS398 Format) and a 1-page detailed budget justification. Pilot projects should plan on taking advantage of HNORC core facilities. If funds are requested to support services from one or more of the HNORC cores, please include these as line items in the budget. **Travel should not be included, and strong justification will be required for any piece of equipment.** (Maximum, 1 page for budget justification). ***DO NOT SUBMIT A MODULAR BUDGET. Indirect costs will not be paid.***
3. The applicant's **NIH biosketch** (maximum of 5 pages): In the "Personal Statement", please identify yourself as an early-career investigator or an established investigator not currently working in the obesity and nutrition fields, and briefly describe your research experience that is relevant. Please include a list of recent publications and previous projects.
4. **Other Support:** Sources and amounts of funds currently available to support research on this or related subjects by the applicant and/or by a senior investigator with whom the applicant is associated. If such funds exist, the applicant should state clearly why HNORC P/F funds are needed. List any pending applications at granting agencies with potential budgetary overlap.
5. **Research Plan** (maximum of 2 pages). The research plan should include sufficient information to evaluate the project and should include the following sections:
 - a. Specific aims (integrated into the research plan, and not included as a separate page):
 - List numerically and make them brief and to the point.
The aims should address specific hypotheses rather than just gathering data or doing a "fishing expedition". List the hypotheses your aims address.
 - b. Significance and Innovation
 - Very briefly describe why this work is important and how it addresses a critical problem or scientific question in the field. How does this work challenge existing paradigms with novel approaches or methods?

c. Background and Preliminary Studies :

- Make a synthesis from your literature review rather than just a listing of a string of facts.
- Preliminary data is not required in the grant, since this is a pilot/feasibility grant.
- If you have relevant preliminary results, these should be included and indicate whether it was done by you or someone else. If there is key preliminary data to show feasibility of your idea this should be included within this section of the application.

d. Research approach (Study design, methodology, data analysis and any problem areas anticipated) :

- Explain the rationale for your experimental design and for choosing one particular approach over another.
 - There is no need (or space) to give minute details of common methods. Instead, state briefly the type of method that will be used and indicate what results will be expected.
 - Describe how you will analyze your results and address the potential pitfalls and potential problems you may encounter.
 - **Important: Within the research approach, describe how this project relates to the theme of the HNORC:** Projects must be related to obesity or nutrition research, and new directions are highly encouraged. This can encompass obesity comorbidities including type 2 diabetes, peripheral and central nervous system regulation of energy intake, obesity-related cardiovascular disease, etc. If you have questions regarding appropriateness of your research topic, please contact any of the HNORC research directors.
6. **Literature Cited:** List numerically, either in order of citation in the text or alphabetically.
 7. **Timeline:** Provide a timeline for your project (1/2 page). Explain how you will carry out your project over the course of funding and any anticipated milestones that can be addressed in your annual progress report.
 8. **Briefly describe the use of the HNORC cores for your project (1/2 page).** Specifically, outline how the cores will facilitate this research. Describe how you plan to participate and become involved in the activities of the HNORC, such as attending regular HNORC seminar series as well as the annual symposium.
 9. Protocols using human subjects, animals, radioisotopes or biohazardous materials must have appropriate review and approval before HNORC funds can be expended. It is not necessary to obtain these approvals or a Routing Sheet before the application is reviewed. **If an application is approved, all of the relevant approvals must be obtained prior to final funding.**
 10. For any project involving human subjects, you will be required to submit a **planned enrollment table and data sharing plan** for all nonexempt Human Subjects research. These items must be submitted before funding can be finalized.
 11. **Applications require the signature of the chair of the applicant's academic unit (on the Summary Sheet).** *This signature will confirm that all clinicians who are PI's will have 50% protected time to perform the research. It is not necessary to obtain institutional signatures from the Office of Research.*

SUBMISSION OF APPLICATIONS

The completed application (including the Summary Sheet) should be combined into one PDF file and submitted via our online system by **5:00 p.m. CST, Monday, January 5, 2026**. You will receive a confirmation email once you have submitted your application. **If you do not receive a notification, please email HNORC-Admin@bcm.edu before the 5 p.m. CST deadline.**

REVIEW PROCESS

Proposals will be reviewed and rated by a committee composed of the HNORC Executive Committee, Internal Advisory Committee, and ad hoc members selected from senior faculty at the Texas Medical Center or elsewhere. This committee is chaired by Kristin Eckel-Mahan, Ph.D. She can be reached at and 713-500-2487 (EckelMahan, Kristin.l.mahan@uth.tmc.edu). Final approval for funding will be made by the HNORC Internal and External Advisory Committee members.

As the review panel will be composed of members who may not be familiar with the topic of an application, applicants are advised to avoid specialized jargon, to provide definitions and brief descriptions of sophisticated procedures, and to state clearly the hypothesis to be tested and the significance of the research.

The Pilot / Feasibility Awardees will be announced by the end of January 2026 by email and on the HNORC website.

AWARD CONDITIONS

All funded PF applications should have a start date no earlier than March 1, 2026. Award letters will be sent out in February 2026. All applicable materials, protocols, enrollment tables, and data sharing plans will be required before funding is completed. **Any delays in funding do not constitute a no-cost extension.**

Funded pilot feasibility awardees are required to attend the weekly HNORC Research Forum. Awardees will also be required to present updates on their pilot projects after their year of funding has been completed.

Post award management questions can be directed to HNORC Administrator, HNORC-Admin@bcm.edu

APPLICANT CHECKLIST

1. Notice of Intent submitted to online system by **December 8, 2025**
2. Application
 - a. **HNORC Summary Sheet** (with signature of your Department chair)
 - b. **NIH Table of Contents** (NIH form)
 - c. **NIH Budget & Budget Justification** No indirect costs (IDC) allowed.
 - d. **NIH Biosketch**
 - e. **Current Other Support**
 - f. **Research Strategy** (max. 2 pgs)
 - g. **Literature cited**
 - h. **Long-term goals** (Including plans for future grant applications. Outline a mentoring plan if applicant has not had previous extramural federal funding (including letter from mentor))
 - i. **Letter from mentor** (Should assure their commitment to you and an evaluation of your project plan, if applicable)
 - j. **Mentor's NIH Biosketch (if applicable)**
 - k. *If the PI has recently been part of a group led by a more advanced investigator, a letter explaining how this project will lead to independence.*
 - l. **Letter(s) of collaboration**, if applicable
 - m. **Describe how project relates to the theme of the HNORC**
 - n. **Describe use of HNORC cores**

Combine full application into one (1) PDF file and submit via the online application system by 5 p.m. CST on January 5, 2026.



Houston Nutrition Obesity Research Center (H-NORC)

PILOT/FEASIBILITY AWARDS APPLICATION SUMMARY SHEET

Name of PI: _____ Degree: _____ Academic Title: _____
Department: _____ Institution: _____
Mail Station: _____ Phone No.: _____ Fax No.: _____ E-mail: _____
Short Title of Project (do not exceed 56 characters and spaces): _____

Type of Application: _____ Pilot project _____ Collaborative project _____
BUDGET: Supplies: \$ _____ Small Equip.: \$ _____ Personnel: \$ _____ Other: \$ _____
Total: \$ _____ (No indirect costs on these pilot awards)

Has ☐ the PI of a ☐ pilot project application recently been part of a group led by a more advanced investigator?
Yes No (If yes, a letter citing independence of the PI for this project must be included.)

If the PI of the pilot project has **not** had a previous grant, does the PI have a mentor? Yes ☐ No ☐ (A letter describing the commitment of the mentor and a mentoring plan must be included.) HNORC Cores to be utilized:

☐ Clinical and Translational Obesity Research ☐ Cellular and Molecular Metabolism ☐ Neuroendocrine

CHECK APPLICABLE BOXES:

	Yes	No		Yes	No
Human Subjects:	☐	☐	Biohazards:	☐	☐
Radioisotopes:	☐	☐	Animals:	☐	☐

SUMMARY: Write a short paragraph, **not to exceed the space below**, describing major aims of the project and the approach to be used.

APPLICANT'S SIGNATURE: DATE:

ACADEMIC UNIT CHAIR'S SIGNATURE:

DATE:

Information: Sara Tristan, Administrator, B.S., Baylor College of Medicine, 7200 Cambridge, 8th Floor, Houston, TX 77030; Tel 713-798-3478;
escamill@bcm.edu