Bridge to Independence Award Request for Applications

SFARI mission
The Simons Foundation Autism Research Initiative (SFARI) seeks to improve the understanding, diagnosis and treatment of autism spectrum disorders by funding innovative research of the highest quality and relevance.

Rationale and Overview
The autism research community has expanded substantially in recent years and SFARI has contributed to this change by attracting outstanding established scientists to the field of autism. In order to sustain this level of scientific excellence in future years, SFARI is extending our support to promising early-career investigators. One of the most salient milestones in a scientific career is the transition from formal mentorship to an independent position. Unfortunately, this transition has become increasingly tenuous in recent years, in part because of the decreasing number of tenure-track faculty positions, compounded by the increasing number of Ph.D. graduates and postgraduate traineeships. SFARI created the Bridge to Independence Award program to address this issue and to encourage continued excellence in the autism research field.

Grants awarded through the Bridge to Independence Award program are intended to invest in the next generation of top autism investigators by identifying talented early-career scientists interested in autism research and facilitating their transition to an independent research career. This request for applications (RFA) is aimed at senior postdoctoral fellows who intend to seek tenure-track faculty positions during the 2017–18 academic year. Successful applicants will be notified that they are finalists in the Bridge to Independence Award program and will have one year to submit an approval application, which includes confirmation of a tenure-track professorship at a U.S. academic institution, review of the institution’s research environment and resources, and institutional signoff. After the Simons Foundation accepts the approval application, the finalist will become a grantee and receive a commitment of $150,000 per year over three years, awarded through their faculty appointment institution.

Application process

The application process will proceed in two stages. In the first stage, Ph.D. or M.D. applicants currently in mentored training positions (and ideally in laboratories currently pursuing autism-relevant studies) must submit an autism-relevant research project; such a proposal should describe the studies that an applicant plans to pursue once they have attained an independent, tenure-track faculty position at an academic institution.

Competitive proposals will be reviewed by an external scientific panel. Reviewers will weigh criteria related to the applicant’s scientific potential (as assessed by the applicant’s scientific publication record, previous support and letters of recommendation) and ability to formulate an impactful, innovative and feasible autism research project.
Top applicants will be notified of their finalist status, at which time they have up to one year to secure a tenure-track position at a U.S. academic institution. To proceed from the finalist to grantee stage, finalists must submit an approval application. This application includes a copy of their faculty appointment letter and other documentation to assure the foundation that adequate institutional support is in place for successful completion of the autism-relevant research project. The quality of the approval application will be evaluated internally, but the intent is to fund all finalists who retain their commitment to pursuing autism-relevant, high-quality scientific investigations. Once SFARI has accepted the approval application, the Bridge to Independence Award will be awarded and the funding initiated.

Eligibility

- Applicants must hold a Ph.D., M.D. or equivalent degree
- Applicants must have fewer than six (6) years of postdoctoral or otherwise mentored training.
- Applicants must be currently in non-independent, mentored, training positions, as recognized by their institution. The following guidelines should be used to distinguish independent from non-independent positions (modified from NIH’s K99/R00 Program Announcement eligibility section):

  Evidence for non-independence may include:
  - The applicant’s research is entirely funded by another investigator’s grants.
  - The applicant’s research is conducted entirely in another investigator’s assigned space.
  - According to institutional policy, the applicant is not allowed to submit an application for an NIH research grant (e.g., R01) or SFARI grant (e.g. Explorer, Pilot, Research, and Targeted awards) as the principal investigator.

  Conversely, evidence for independence, and therefore lack of eligibility, includes:
  - The applicant has a full-time faculty position. Exception: A clinician who holds a faculty member position in order to fulfill their clinical responsibilities but who does not hold an independent research faculty position may still be eligible. Such individuals should contact the foundation to confirm their eligibility prior to submitting their applications.
  - The applicant received a start-up package for support of his/her independent research.
  - The applicant has research space dedicated to his/her own research.
  - The applicant is eligible to apply for independent research funding as the PI of an NIH research grant (e.g., R01) or SFARI grant (Explorer, Pilot, Research, and Targeted awards).

- Applicants must be actively seeking a tenure-track position at a U.S. institution of higher education during 2017-18 academic year.
- Applicants are not eligible if they are recipients of other career development awards with similar budgetary scope as the SFARI Bridge to Independence award. These include, but are not limited to:
  - NIH K99/R00 (please note that other K awardees may be eligible, e.g., K01 and K08)
  - Burroughs-Wellcome Fund Career Award for Medical Scientists
  - American Academy of Neurology Career Development Award
  - Howard Hughes Medical Institute Hanna H. Gray fellowship
You are strongly encouraged to contact SFARI prior to grant submission if you believe your
career development award is comparable to the BTI award but is not listed above.

- Applicants must **not** have accepted a formal offer for a tenure-track faculty position.
- There are no citizenship requirements.

All potential applicants with questions about eligibility are strongly encouraged to contact SFARI at grants@simonsfoundation.org before submitting an application.

**Level and Duration of Funding**
The principal investigator (PI) will receive research support at a fixed rate of $150,000 per year, including 20 percent for indirect costs (see SFARI policies), for up to three (3) years. The award is administered through the institution at which the PI has a tenured faculty appointment. Finalists may defer submission of their approval application for up to one year after receiving their finalist notification in order to secure their faculty position. Funds may not be used toward the PI’s salary but may provide salary support for other laboratory personnel. Institutional start-up packages may not be reduced because of SFARI funding.

**Important dates**

1 June 2017:.proposalCENTRAL opens for first-stage proposals
7 August 2017: Letters of recommendation and First-stage proposals due
20 November 2017: Finalists notified
1 December 2017–1 December 2018: Approval Application submission (rolling basis)
1 January 2018–1 December 2019: Funding begins (rolling basis)*

*Note: Funding begins within one year of the award letter date.

**Instructions for Submission**

**First-stage proposals**
The deadline for receipt of the first-stage proposal is 7 August 2017. First-stage proposals must be completed electronically and submitted using forms provided at http://proposalcentral.altum.com/. Please log in as an applicant, go to the “Grant Opportunities” tab, scroll to “Simons Foundation” and click “Apply Now” for the “SFARI Bridge to Independence Award” program.

First-stage proposals require the submission of a letter of intent and should include the following (for more details, see the Instructions document, available for download in the “Download Templates and Instructions” section of proposalCENTRAL):

1. The research proposal should be no more than six (6) pages long (including references, tables and figures) and should include the research project’s specific aims, significance, experimental approach, innovation and potential impact on autism research.
2. Biosketch
3. Overview of scientific interests and goals—up to one (1)-page overview of your future research program as an independent investigator and how autism science fits in with your intended research program
4. Letter from current institution officially confirming you are in a mentored training position (e.g., letter from department chair or grant office)
5. Letters of recommendation (separate, blind submission; deadline 7 August 2017):
Three letters of recommendation from current or former mentors, or other senior scientists who have substantial familiarity with your scientific career thus far are required. At least one letter of recommendation must be from a current or former scientific mentor. Confidential letters must be submitted through proposalCENTRAL (see instructions available for download in proposalCENTRAL).

Finalists
Successful applicants will be deemed finalists and notified of their status by 20 November 2017. The finalist notification letters will outline SFARI’s commitment to awarding the Bridge to Independence Award, contingent upon satisfactory fulfillment of the approval application. Once notified, finalists have up to one year to secure a tenure-track faculty position and submit an approval application.

Approval Application
Most notably, the Approval Application must include the tenure-track faculty appointment offer letter with confirmed research start-up package and laboratory space commitments. Other required documents include applicable updates to the research proposal, biosketch, current and pending support, budget, budget justification, research environment and resources, renewable reagents and data-sharing plan, and signature page.

SFARI will review these documents and, if deemed acceptable, an award letter will be sent. SFARI recognizes that there may be a time lag in setting up a new laboratory, so awardees may delay their grant activation for up to one year after receipt of the award letter.

SFARI reserves the right to withhold grant support 1) if the applicant is unable to secure a tenure-track position at a suitable academic institution within one year of their finalist notification letter, 2) if an institutional environment is deemed inadequate by SFARI to support successful completion of the research project, 3) if the revised and updated research plan is not considered adequate, or 4) if the applicant is unable to fulfill the responsibilities of the PI for other reasons. Such instances will be handled on a case-by-case basis. It is our intention that withholding grant support from finalists will occur only in rare instances. When appropriate, SFARI will work with finalists and their prospective institutions in developing mutually agreeable solutions.

Contacts
Scientific inquiries: sciencerfa@simonsfoundation.org 646-654-0066
Administrative inquiries: grants@simonsfoundation.org 646-654-0066
Simons collections inquiries: collections@sfari.org 646-654-0066
proposalCENTRAL: pcsupport@altum.com 800-875-2562

References