

# COBRE FOR RESTORATION OF NEURAL-BASED FUNCTION PILOT PROJECT PROGRAM REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS (RFA) and SUBMISSION GUIDELINES 2026 - 2027 FUNDING CYCLE

## KEY DATES

<b>RFA Release Date</b>	<b>November 17, 2025</b>
<b>Letter of Intent Due Date</b>	<b>December 15, 2025</b>
<b>Proposal Application Due Date</b>	<b>January 5, 2026</b>
<b>Project Start Date</b>	<b>August 1, 2026</b>

## PILOT PROJECT PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The COBRE for Restoration of Neural-Based Function Pilot Project Program aims to attract junior and senior investigators into the field of neural-based function and recovery research, promote utilization of the COBRE cores, develop new collaborations and mentoring relationships, and provide preliminary data for subsequent high-quality extramural research awards (NIH R-series and equivalents) and peer-reviewed manuscripts.

## COBRE MISSION

A better understanding of the experience-dependent nature of neural plasticity will enable us to investigate and exploit inherent neural recovery processes to develop and translate novel mechanism-based interventions to improve function in the home or community.

## PILOT PROJECT CATEGORIES

The COBRE funds projects in two categories:

<b>Grant Categories</b>	<b>Brief Description</b>	<b>Award Amount</b>	<b>Award Duration</b>
<b>Early Stage and New Investigator Awards</b>	Provide mentored research experiences for investigators that meet the definition of NIH Early Stage Investigators (ESIs), as well as for investigators at any stage new to the field of neural-based function. These projects should use COBRE cores to conduct research that aligns with the COBRE mission. These projects will provide important preliminary data for NIH Career Development applications (K-series), research grants (R-series) or their equivalents.	Up to \$30,000	12 months
<b>Discovery Awards</b>	Provide strategic support to explore the feasibility of projects that align with the COBRE mission leading to collaborative R01s or center grants.	Up to \$30,000	12 months

## TO APPLY

Submit the application using this link: <https://redcap.musc.edu/surveys/?s=JTMYRTCC9TKLJMDF>

## PROGRAM QUESTIONS:

Dr. Steve Kautz  
Email: [kautz@musc.edu](mailto:kautz@musc.edu)

## ADMINISTRATIVE QUESTIONS:

LuAnne O'Connor  
Email: [harleylu@musc.edu](mailto:harleylu@musc.edu)  
Phone: 843-792-3320

## KEY ELEMENTS OF THE COBRE FOR RESTORATION OF NEURAL-BASED FUNCTION PILOT PROJECT PROGRAM

The program's main objective is to promote the growth of the COBRE for Restoration of Neural-Based Function through the development of new extramural funding and the utilization, enhancement, and advancement of critical technologies and COBRE core services. **The pilot project program is not designed to provide ongoing support for a long-term project or supplemental support for ongoing funded research projects. As such:**

- **ClinicalTrials.gov NCT Numbers:** In accordance with the requirements above, pilot awards are intended to be **standalone projects**. For pilots that meet the definition of an NIH Clinical Trial and require registration on ClinicalTrials.gov, the pilot must not be combined with a larger study under a single NCT number, nor should the pilot study be extended to include additional phases (with additional participant enrollment or downstream reportable results) beyond the NIH- and COBRE-approved scope of work.

## PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY

- Investigators may submit only one application as PI or MPI in any pilot project category per annual funding cycle. In addition, investigators may serve as a Mentor for only one Mentored Investigator Pilot Grant per annual funding cycle. Investigators may serve as Co-Investigator on multiple applications. Applicants with current IDeA (e.g., COBRE, CTR, or INBRE) research funding are not eligible for funding under this opportunity. **Each Pilot PI must commit 1 person month effort to the project.**
- The PI of a pilot project proposal in any category must be a faculty member at the Medical University of South Carolina and possess an earned doctoral degree. Collaboration with investigators at other institutions is encouraged in roles such as Co-Investigator, Consultant, Collaborator, Advisory Member, Mentor, or Co-Mentor, as appropriate. Individuals who are not US citizens or Permanent Residents are eligible to apply as PI if the terms and conditions of their faculty appointment allow submission to extramural funding agencies.
- Applicants for **Early Stage and New Investigator Awards** may not have been or currently be PI of an NIH R01, P01 sub-project, or equivalents (e.g., VA Merit awards).
- Applicants for **Discovery Awards** may be faculty of any rank at MUSC and should have a record of accomplishment in their chosen field.
- Previous recipients of Early Career and New Investigator Awards are not eligible to compete again for additional funding in this category.

## PILOT GRANT MECHANISM-SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS

- **Early Stage and New Investigator Awards** require PIs to designate a primary research mentor for the pilot project. The mentor must have recognition as an accomplished scientist in his/her chosen field, a strong history of competitive research support, and a track record of success in training independent investigators. Applications must include a detailed letter from the proposed mentor describing the **Mentoring Plan** (e.g., frequency of mentor/mentee meetings, access to space and/or equipment, scientific knowledge to be gained [e.g., methods, techniques]). Multiple PIs are not allowed in this category.
- **Discovery Awards.** No specific requirements beyond fitting within the COBRE's mission.

## BUDGET

Projects may not be used to provide ongoing support for established research or provide bridge funding. **Indirect costs (F&A) are not allowed on pilot projects or subawards.** Funds may be requested for standard allowable expense categories such as key personnel and technical support (including fringe benefits at institutionally established rates), research supplies, professional travel directly beneficial to the proposed research, and other direct costs such as laboratory animal costs, research subject compensation, and data analysis/statistical support. Pilot project funds may not be used for equipment,

administrative support, subscriptions, memberships, renovations, or alterations. **Each Pilot PI must commit 1 person month effort to the project.**

## THE APPLICATION PROCESS

### 1) Letter of Intent

Although a Letter of Intent (LOI) is not required, is not binding, and does not enter into the review of a subsequent application, the LOI allows us to estimate the potential review workload and assure that the topic is relevant to the COBRE mission. LOIs should contain the following information:

- Descriptive title of proposed research
- Name, email address, and telephone number of the PI
- Complete listing of the investigative team with each individual's academic title, primary department, and proposed role on the project (including the proposed mentor(s) for Early Stage/New Investigator applications)
- Pilot grant category (Early Stage/New Investigator or Discovery)

Email the Letter of Intent to LuAnne O'Connor, [harleylu@musc.edu](mailto:harleylu@musc.edu) by 5:00 p.m. on **12/15/2025**.

### 2) NIH Grant Instructions for a R-series Application

For formatting and guideline assistance in writing the pilot proposal, please reference the NIH link below.

<https://grants.nih.gov/policy-and-compliance/implementation-of-new-initiatives-and-policies/updated-forms-l-instructions>

### 3) Resubmission of an Application

Applicants may submit **one revised application** in response to review comments from a previous COBRE Pilot Project Program application cycle. PIs must address the review critiques using the NIH instructions for an R-series Introduction to Application, limited to 1 page (see the link in #2 above for NIH instructions).

### 4) Application Instructions

Applications must be submitted via the REDCap link on the first page of this document.

- Applications are comprised of the online form and five PDF uploads
- Formatting:
  - Font: Arial
  - Font Size: 11-point (except tables and figures can be 9-point)
  - Margins: No smaller 0.5-inch on all sides

### Online Form (Entries with an \* are required fields)

- Project Title
- Pilot Category
- PI Name
- PI eRA Commons User Name
- PI Faculty Rank
- PI College/School, Department
- PI Phone Number
- PI Email Address
- Business Manager Name, Phone Number, Email Address
- The same information is required for each Co-PI (except Early Stage/New Investigator applications, as Co-PIs are not allowed)

### PDF Upload 1: Biosketches for All Key Personnel

- Use the latest NIH Biosketch form and instructions at:  
<https://grants.nih.gov/grants-process/write-application/forms-directory/biosketch>
- Combine all Key Personnel biosketches in the following order, alphabetically by group (Contact PI; Co-PIs if allowed; Mentor(s) if required; all other investigators, advisors, etc.)

### **PDF Upload 2: Project Summary/Abstract and Relevance**

- The **Project Summary/Abstract** (30 lines max) should serve as a succinct and accurate description of the proposed work when separated from the application. State the application's broad, long-term objectives and specific aims, relating them to the mission of the COBRE. Describe concisely the research design and methods for achieving the stated goals. This section should be informative to others working in the same or related fields and understandable to a scientifically or technically literate reader. Below the 30-line Project Summary/Abstract, using no more than two or three sentences, describe the **Relevance** of this research to public health. The Relevance statement should be succinct and written using plain language that can be understood by a general, lay audience.

### **PDF Upload 3: Research Plan**

- 5-page limit (1 page for Specific Aims, 3 pages for Research Strategy, and 1 page for Additional Review Criteria). **Special note:** revised applications must include a 1-page "Introduction to Application" at the beginning of the Research Plan (see #3 above) for a limit of 6 pages.
- Combine all documents into a single PDF document for uploading under "Research Plan."
- The **Specific Aims** should state concisely the goals of the proposed research and summarize the expected outcome(s), including the impact that the results of the proposed research will exert on the field of restoration of neural-based function. List succinctly the specific objectives of the research proposal, e.g., to test a stated hypothesis, solve a specific problem, challenge an existing paradigm or clinical practice, address a critical barrier to progress in the field, or develop a new technology. **The Specific Aims section is limited to one page.**
- The **Research Strategy** should follow the standard NIH format (see the link to NIH instructions in #2 above), which includes Significance, Innovation, and Approach; a description of how the application fits within the COBRE's mission; and any mechanism-specific instructions detailed on page 2 of this RFA. **The Research Strategy section is limited to three pages.**
- The **Additional Review Criteria** section must address the following (**limited to 1 page of text plus one support letter**):
  1. State how your project plans to utilize the COBRE's core facilities. There are two cores:
    - a. **Neural Function Core** – resources and expertise for measuring and modulating neural function
    - b. **Quantitative Behavioral Assessment and Rehabilitation (QBAR) Core** – resources and expertise for measuring behavior/function and performing rehabilitation interventions.
  2. State how you plan to secure future extramural funding at the conclusion of the pilot. Include anticipated funding agency(ies), mechanism(s), and timeline.
  3. Describe any new collaborations with COBRE investigators.

### **Beyond the 5-page limit:**

- A **Biostatistical Justification** of sample size should be included for animal studies and any aims that include human tissue samples, patients, or healthy volunteers. Biostatistical consultations are available through the COBRE Administrative Core. Please contact Dr. [Viswanthan Ramakrishnan](#) to schedule a meeting to discuss your proposal's biostatistical needs. Please plan accordingly when submitting statistical consultation requests to allow for ample time prior to application deadline. The Biostatistical Justification should be placed at the end of the Research Strategy and is not included in the page limit.
- A **Literature Cited** section should be placed at the end of the Research Strategy, following the biostatistical justification, and is not included in the page limit.

- A **Data Management and Sharing Plan** should be placed at the end of the Research Strategy section following the literature cited section that complies with NIH instructions (see #2 above).
- A **Mentoring Plan for Early Stage/New Investigator applications** should be placed after biostatistical justification (and before literature cited) detailing frequency of mentor/mentee meetings, access to space and/or equipment, scientific knowledge to be gained (e.g., methods, techniques), etc.

#### **PDF Upload 4: Budget and Justification**

- **Prior to submission**, applicants should schedule a Proposal Development Meeting with LuAnne O'Connor ([harleylu@musc.edu](mailto:harleylu@musc.edu) or 843-792-3320) to discuss their proposed budget.
- For the budget, please use PHS 398 Form Page 4: Detailed Budget for Initial Budget Period (1 page) at <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/funding/phs398/phs398.html>. Upload the budget and justification as a single PDF file. The COBRE leadership team reserves the right to reduce requested budget amounts.
- As previously stated, projects may not be used to provide ongoing support for established research or provide bridge funding. **Indirect costs (F&A) are not allowed on pilot projects or subawards.** Funds may be requested for standard allowable expense categories such as key personnel and technical support (including fringe benefits at institutionally established rates), research supplies, professional travel directly beneficial to the proposed research, and other direct costs such as laboratory animal costs, research subject compensation, and data analysis/statistical support. Pilot project funds may not be used for general office supplies, computers/laptops, tuition, equipment, food, administrative support, subscriptions, memberships, renovations, or alterations.
- **Special note for subcontracts:** No COBRE subaward funds can be committed to an institution located outside of an [IDeA state](#). If a sub-award is planned, please contact LuAnne O'Connor, 843-792-3320 or [harleylu@musc.edu](mailto:harleylu@musc.edu) to determine if the receiving institution is located within an NIH-determined IDeA state.
- Post-award management of pilot project funds and any related cost-shares will be managed by the COBRE for Restoration of Neural-Based Function Grant Administrator and the College of Health Professions Research Administration team. An individual account will be established for funded pilot projects and cost-shares, and instructions for the process of funding personnel and ordering supplies will be provided upon official notification of award.

#### **PDF Upload 5: Regulatory Documents**

- Studies involving **Vertebrate Animals** must include NIH-required vertebrate animals attachment that complies with the NIH R-series grant instructions (see #2 above).
- Studies involving **Human Subjects** must include PHS Human Subjects and Clinical Trials Information form (complete with all applicable attachments) that complies with the NIH R-series grant instructions (see #2 above). Link to the PHS Human Subjects and Clinical Trials Information Study Record form: <https://grants.nih.gov/grants-process/write-application/forms-directory/standard-form-424-research-related>

#### **Citations**

If awarded, each publication, press release, or other such document must include the following acknowledgement: "This research was supported in whole or in part by the NIH/NIGMS under award number P30GM154630 – COBRE for Restoration of Neural-Based Function. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the NIH."

#### **APPLICATION REVIEW CRITERIA AND PROCESS**

Each application will be assigned to at least two reviewers with appropriate expertise and without conflict of interest who are faculty members at MUSC or external academic institutions. Statistical reviews will also be conducted on each application as appropriate. Reviewers are instructed to evaluate the quality

of the research using the 9-point NIH rating scale (1= Exceptional to 9= Poor). An NIH-style study section meeting will be held to discuss reviews and prioritize the applications based on the overall impact score and the programmatic needs of the COBRE for Restoration of Neural-Based Function. Funding recommendations will be forwarded to the COBRE's Advisory Committee for approval. Applications selected for funding by the COBRE will then be submitted to NIH for final approval. Applicants are **strongly urged** to obtain the required IRB, IBC, and IACUC approvals as soon as possible, as final approval from NIH cannot be provided until all regulatory approvals are in place.