



## Office of Graduate Fellowships Workshop

### **Fellowships and the Ph.D. / Dissertation Process**

#### **Dissertation Fellowships and the Progression of the Ph.D. Program**

When searching for funding opportunities at the doctoral level, it is crucial to understand the types of awards that exist and how they fit into the typical progression of an American Ph.D. program. Doctoral fellowships tend to cluster around the major milestones and “chokepoints” of the Ph.D. process:

- **Setting Your Sights on the Ph.D.:** These awards aim to support students who are newly embarking on graduate study. Such awards are intended to attract talented students into particular fields or topics of study – especially in fields where committing to years of graduate study represents a significant opportunity cost over what these candidates might hope to earn in the work force (such STEM fields). In some cases the support may come in the form of a multi-year package that includes tuition, stipend, and summer or professional development opportunities. In other cases, the award may be a smaller, one-time contribution to help the student get started on their way.
  - **When to Apply:** Usually at the same time you apply to your Ph.D. or Master’s/Ph.D. program (i.e. before you enter your first graduate program.) Some programs will allow you to apply during the first semesters of graduate study (including Master’s level study), but usually not beyond the second or third semester. Candidates who already possess a Master’s degree may no longer be eligible.
  - **Examples:** NSF GRFP, NDSEG, Soros Fellowships for New Americans
  
- **Pre-Dissertation Awards:** The term “pre-dissertation” is used to describe awards for students who are already in a Ph.D. program but not yet advanced to candidacy. There are only a handful of such awards. Their goal is usually to support the candidate as they lay the groundwork for their dissertation research.
  - **When to Apply:** Usually during the first or second year of the Ph.D. program.
  - **Examples:** Ford Foundation Pre-Dissertation Fellowship, SSRC DPDF. Note that student in this category may also be at the right stage to apply for international programs such as Fulbright, Boren, and CLS that will allow them to gain language skills or lay the groundwork for international dissertation research.
  - **Note:** Although they are not technically “predissertation” fellowships, Fulbright U.S. Student Program and Boren Fellowship awards can also be used for this purpose for students planning to conduct international research.

- **Advancement to Candidacy / Comprehensive exams / Approval of the Dissertation Proposal:** These events mark the transition from the coursework / preparatory phase of graduate work to the phase in which the student emerges as an individual researcher and scholar working on their first major independent project (the dissertation). These awards are designed to fund students who by the time of the award will be advanced to candidacy, have an approved dissertation topic, and be actively engaged in research on that topic. Awards in this category may take the form of research grants (which provide funds to cover research costs but not cost of living or educational costs) or fellowships (which provide a stipend and possibly also tuition support.)

  - **When to Apply:** During the year in which you will advance to candidacy and obtain approval for your dissertation topic (and in subsequent years depending on timing and eligibility).
  - **Examples:** NSF DDIG/DDRIG, Fulbright-Hays, SSRC IDRF, NIJ Graduate Fellowship
  
- **Dissertation Writing / Dissertation Completion:** Dissertation writing fellowships aim to see advanced doctoral students through their final year in the Ph.D. program, during which they will complete and defend their dissertation while making plans for what comes next. A special category within this group of awards is made up of “residential” fellowships in which the fellow completes the dissertation in residence at another institution, sometimes while teaching or otherwise participating in the intellectual life of the host institution. Residential awards are often targeted at under-represented minorities (variously defined) with the aim of diversifying the institution’s faculty profile.

  - **When to Apply:** During the penultimate year of your Ph.D. program – i.e. the year before your final year. Your proposal will consist of a description of your dissertation project and a plan showing how you will use the fellowship year to complete the work.
  - **Examples:** Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowships  
Harry Frank Guggenheim Dissertation Fellowships  
Ford Foundation Dissertation Fellowships  
AAUW American Fellowships (Women)
  
- **Postdoctoral Fellowships:** Postdoctoral fellowships support new and recent PhDs as they seek to establish their professional careers. Postdoctoral fellowships in academic settings generally seek to groom the fellow for an academic or research career. Some government agencies, NGOs, foundations, and private corporations also offer postdoctoral fellowships for professional development in non-academic career paths (these awards may also require professional experience.) Post-doc awards are usually open to applicants up to a few years after graduation from a PhD program.

  - **When to Apply:** During the final year of dissertation writing, in anticipation of beginning the fellowship after defending the dissertation and obtaining the Ph.D., OR in the first years after completion of the Ph.D. Some post-doctoral awards are “portable,” while others require residency at a host institution. Many are field-specific.
  - **Example:** Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship, ACLS Public Fellows

**Note that some foundations offer more than one type of grant, for example:**

- Ford Foundation: Pre-dissertation, Dissertation Completion, and Postdoctoral
- NSF: GRFP (for beginning graduate students), DDIG/DDRIG (for dissertation research), and a variety of postdoctoral opportunities.

**There are also a few awards that are flexible in terms of when (i.e. at what stage) you may apply:**

- DoD SMART (STEM fields including behavioral sciences with national security relevance)
- NIH F31 (health-related research aligned with NIH funding priorities)
- Fulbright U.S. Student Grants (for independent overseas research/study)
- Boren Fellowships (for overseas training in critical needs and under-studied languages)

**Notes and Questions**