



Office of Graduate Fellowships

NIH F31 Grants: Ruth Kirschstein National Research Service Awards (NRSA)

About the F31 / Kirschstein Fellowships

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) offers research and training fellowships for individuals working toward the doctorate in fields of special interest to NIH. The goal of this program is to build and maintain a diverse pool of scientific talent with training and expertise in matters relating to the health and well being of the nation, and to promote the leading role of the United States in the advancement of health-related research.

Eligibility: To be eligible to apply to the F31 fellowship program a student must: (1) Be a U.S. citizen, national, or permanent resident; (2) Possess a baccalaureate degree and be currently enrolled in a PhD or equivalent research degree program (e.g., EngD, DNSc, Dr PH, DSW, PharmD, PsyD, ScD); (3) Be at (or approaching) the dissertation research stage of their training and must show evidence of both high academic performance in the sciences and substantial interest in a research area of high priority to the participating Institutes; (4) Have a mentor willing to serve as the “sponsor” for the project (in most cases this is the dissertation advisor.)

The F31 grants are part of a series of “F”-coded grants collectively known as the Ruth L. Kirschstein National Research Service Awards (NRSA) Individual Fellowship Funding Opportunities. They are named for Dr. Ruth L. Kirschstein, a medical doctor who did important work on the development of the polio vaccine and went on to become a leading administrator at NIH. In the 1970s Kirschstein became the first woman to direct an institute at NIH, and she later served as the Deputy Director and Acting Director of the NIH. Kirschstein died in 2009. You can learn more about her career and her legacy here:

<http://www.nigms.nih.gov/Training/ruthkirschstein.htm>

What distinguishes the Kirschstein NRSA (“F Series”) fellowships is that they are awarded to *individuals* – not institutions or programs. In the case of the F31 grants, this means *doctoral students apply individually for an award that will be made in their name and to support their individual program of pre-doctoral research*. The student (not the doctoral supervisor) is named as “Principle Investigator” and is individually responsible for carrying out the funded research with the support and guidance of their mentor. F31 NRSA fellowships are prestigious and highly sought after; awardees are regarded as promising early-career scientists who have demonstrated their ability to design and secure grant funding for a high-quality research project. Winners of F31 grants are generally well-positioned to compete for subsequent “F Series” grants, including F32 Postdoctoral Fellowships and F33 fellowships for senior researchers.

What Kinds of Grants Are Offered Under the F31 Program?

Several different kinds of grants are offered under this program:

- NIH F31 (“Parent F31”): This is the basic NIH F31 grant, whose goal is to “provide support for promising doctoral candidates who will be performing dissertation research and training in scientific health-related fields relevant to the missions of the participating NIH Institutes and Centers (ICs) during the tenure of the award.” Students from all “scientific health related” fields may apply so long as their studies are leading to a Ph.D. and are relevant to the mission of the participating NIH Institute or Center with which they propose to be affiliated. The list of participating NIH Institutes and Centers can be viewed here:
http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/contacts/parent_F31.html
- NIH F31-Diversity (“Parent F31-Diversity”): This group of F31 grants is earmarked for highly qualified candidates who are (a) individuals from under-represented racial and ethnic groups; (b) individuals with disabilities; (c) individuals from socially, culturally, economically, or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds that have inhibited their ability to pursue a career in health-related research. As with the regular F31, students from all eligible fields may apply, so long as their studies are leading to a research-based Ph.D. and are relevant to the mission of the participating NIH Institute or Center with which they propose to be affiliated. This is not a separate competition so much as a supplemental group of F31 grants available to individuals in the above-listed categories. Note, however, that the some NIH Institutes and Centers participate ONLY in the F31 Diversity awards and not the regular competition. F31 grants at these Institutes/Centers are only open to diversity candidates, whereas regular F31 grants are open to ALL candidates. View the list of Institutes and Centers participating in the F31-Diversity program here:
<http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PA-11-112.html>
- NINR F31: For Ph.D. students in Nursing and nurse scientists in related Ph.D. programs whose grants will be affiliated with the National Institute for Nursing Research (NINR). Note that Nursing Ph.D. candidates may also apply to the F31-Parent and F31-Parent-Diversity grants listed above if an institute other than NINR is a better fit for their research and training needs. However, NINR F31 grants are designated specifically for Nursing Ph.D. students. A list of the research areas supported by the NINR can be found here:
<http://www.ninr.nih.gov/researchandfunding/dea/oep/areasofscience>

The F31 program also includes pre-doctoral grants for MD-PhD candidates (F30 and NINDS F31) and PharmD-PhD candidates (NIGMS F31). Because these degrees are not currently offered at Mason, these grants are not discussed here.

Grant Benefits

The F31 grant provides comprehensive support for up to five years, depending on how many years the student requires from the time the grant commences to complete the Ph.D. program. The benefits package includes:

- **Stipend:** A subsistence allowance to defray living expenses during the fellowship period. The level of the stipend is set annually by NIH, and is the same for all fellows funded under the F31 mechanism. In FY 2012 it was \$22,032.
- **Tuition Support:** 60% of the cost of tuition (up to \$16,000.) In some cases the institution supplements this amount to make up the balance of tuition, but you must inquire about this possibility with your graduate program.
- **Institutional Allowance:** \$4,200: This money is paid to the institution to help cover the cost of administering the grant. In most cases, this money is not available to the student grantee, though a portion of it is sometimes released to the grantee cover the cost of health insurance or other sanctioned expenses related to the research and training program. The policy on whether / how much of the institutional allowance is available to the student varies by institution.

Applicants should note that F31 grantees are expected to dedicate themselves full time to their research and training program. This means you are expected to enroll as a full-time student during the tenure of the grant. Under most circumstances it also means that you may not hold other employment during the tenure of the grant. In rare circumstances, exceptions may be granted, but these are uncommon, and prospective applicants who hope to make such arrangements should investigate the possibilities before committing to the application process. This does not include GRA appointments that are part of your training program, but in such a scenario you would be paid by the grant and would not receive an additional GRA salary.

Timing and Deadlines:

F series fellowships run three application cycles per year, with deadlines in April, August, and December. Deadlines, review of the applications and notification of results proceeds as follows:

	Cycle I	Cycle II	Cycle III
Application Deadline	April 8 / 13	August 8 /13	December 8 / 13
Scientific Merit Review	June / July	October / November	February / March
Advisory Council Round	October	January	May
Notification	Late Fall	Early Spring	Late Spring
Earliest Start Date	December	April	July

In light of this calendar, you must plan the timing of your submission based on when you will be ready and when you hope to start your research / training. First-year graduate students will likely be aiming for the December deadline to secure funding beginning in the fall semester of their second year.

Allow yourself at least 6-8 weeks to complete the application. Projects involving human or animal subjects research may involve additional steps in the application and approval process, and applicants should add some extra to this minimum. This means:

- To apply in April, begin working on the application in late February at the latest.
- To apply in August, begin working on the application in late June at the latest.
- To apply in December, begin working on the application in October at the latest.

Note that you must plan very far ahead. If you are offered an award, the earliest you can expect to start is 7-8 months after the application is submitted (9-12 months after you begin working on the application.) Factor into this estimate an awareness that many projects are not funded the first time they apply, and it is common for applicants to revise their applications, reapply, and receive funding on the second or third try. For these reasons, it makes sense to plan far ahead and begin applying for F31 fellowships as early in your graduate career as possible.

Components of the NIH NRSA Application

- Application forms
- Transcripts
- Application Essays and Biosketch
- Sponsor's Essay / Biosketch
- Letters of Recommendation

How to Apply: A Basic Overview

- Step 1: Coordinate with your Advisor / Sponsor: Start talking to your advisor about your intention to apply to the NRSA awards as early as possible in your academic career – ideally during your first year in the PhD program. Work closely with your mentor to develop a training program and a research plan.
- Step 2: Reach out to the Institute or Center at NIH with which you hope to be affiliated.
- Step 3: Meet with the Office of Graduate Fellowships and set up an appointment with a Grants Administrator in the Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP).
- Step 4: Work on your application: Draft essays, biosketch, and any other required attachments, solicit letters of recommendation, and gather supporting documents.
- Step 5: Submit your application to OSP. Note that OSP will require you to submit all of your application materials (including letters of recommendation and other supporting documents) about a week in advance of the “official” deadline meaning that (for example) an April 8 deadline is really more like April 1.