



# USC University of Southern California

## OFFICE OF RESEARCH & INNOVATION

### Innovation Catalyst Program

### Request For Proposals

#### KEY DATES

The following table lists standard due dates. Proposals are due by 5 PM Pacific Time; late submissions will not be reviewed. If a due date falls on a weekend, federal holiday, or USC closure, the deadline will automatically move to the next business day.

INITIATIVE	APPLICATION DEADLINE	EXPECTED FUNDING DATE
Innovation Empowerment	November 14	February
Stevens Translation Catalyst	March 1	May 1
Startup Launch	Rolling Deadline	
Early Career Innovator	November 14	February
Early Career Innovator - Techstars	February 1	March

#### PROGRAM SCOPE

The number of investments made through this program will depend on the quality and strategic alignment of proposals. Funding commitments are also subject to available resources, institutional priorities, cost principles, and other applicable considerations.

#### BUDGET

The following table lists funds to be awarded by initiative

INITIATIVE	FUNDS PROVIDED
Innovation Empowerment	\$15,000
Stevens Translation Catalyst	\$25,000-\$50,000
Startup Launch	Up to \$50,000
Early Career Innovator	\$5,000
Early Career Innovator - Techstars	\$5,000

#### BACKGROUND

The Innovation Catalyst Program was created to support early-stage Trojan innovators across the university. Designed to support student, faculty, staff, and alumni innovators, the program provides resources for a range of innovation-related activities, such as covering legal and incorporation costs, supporting engagement with USC-affiliated startups to gain real-world experience, and advancing use-inspired research with entrepreneurial potential. By helping founders translate ideas into viable ventures, the program aims to promote social and economic impact through innovation and entrepreneurship. Programs like the Innovation Catalyst Program play a critical role in the broader USC innovation ecosystem, which is designed to provide comprehensive support across the commercialization spectrum for USC-affiliated founders.

#### INITIATIVES

The Innovation Catalyst program includes the following initiatives:

- **Innovation Empowerment:** Funds to conduct groundbreaking, use-inspired research and entrepreneurial activities that directly support the launch of a startup or related commercialization efforts. The initiative focuses on translating ideas into viable products, services, or ventures that deliver social and economic impact. Emphasis is placed on early-stage research and development that bridges the gap between innovation and market readiness, equipping student entrepreneurs with the tools, knowledge, and support needed to successfully bring their ideas to life.
- **Stevens Translation Catalyst:** Funds to support projects at the validation or proof-of-concept stage to generate data to ready the project for licensing and/or to attract investors to form a startup or attract additional translational funding. Projects must be based on IP owned by USC. Funding may support direct research activities in a USC lab. In certain cases, it may facilitate work with a commercial partner interested in licensing USC IP if the technology can be validated through sponsored research into the USC lab. In such cases, Translation Catalyst Award funds may be applied to offset university overhead fees associated with a company-sponsored research agreement conducted. Examples of translational work that may be considered under this initiative are provided in the FAQ section. Furthermore, select projects may be considered for participation in external accelerator or innovation catalyst programs partnered with USC, if available and as appropriate.
- **Startup Launch:** Provides up to \$50,000 to support startup formation and early operational needs for USC-affiliated founders. This includes essential activities such as legal services, entity incorporation, intellectual property protection, and other foundational business services necessary to launch and sustain a new venture. By reducing early-stage administrative and legal barriers, the initiative enables founders to focus on validating their ideas and building scalable ventures that drive social and economic impact.
- **Early Career Innovator:** Provides \$5,000 in funding for USC students to gain hands-on experience by working with USC-affiliated startups for a 3-month period. Applicants must rank order three USC companies of interest from list provided [here](#). OORI will facilitate a match with these companies for interviews, and if both the student and company agree to proceed, the award will be made. The initiative is designed to expose early-career innovators to the practical, day-to-day aspects of launching and growing a startup, including activities such as intellectual property strategy, business planning, market analysis, regulatory navigation, and company operations. Awardees must be USC students throughout the 3-month experience. Graduating seniors must complete training period prior to graduation.
- **Early Career Innovator – Techstars:** Provides \$5,000 in funding for USC students to work with USC-affiliated startups participating in the USC Techstars Accelerator for a 3-month period. After applications are received, they will be shared with the USC Techstars teams, who will facilitate interviews to assess fit with participating companies. If a match is identified and both student and company agree to proceed, the award will be made. The initiative offers focused, hands-on experience throughout the accelerator, giving students deeper immersion in startup growth activities such as intellectual property strategy, business development, and investor engagement.

## ELIGIBILITY

Eligibility varies by initiative. An overview is as follows:

INITIATIVE	ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS		
	USC Students	USC Faculty	USC Staff
Innovation Empowerment		x (faculty+student team)	
Stevens Translation Catalyst		x	
Startup Launch	x	x	x
Early Career Innovator	x		
Early Career Innovator – Techstars	x		

**Innovation Empowerment:** Each Innovation Empowerment proposal must consist of a student-faculty team, with at least one USC faculty member serving as the mentor and proposal lead responsible for submitting the application. Teams may also include postdoctoral researchers and high school students.

**Stevens Translation Catalyst:** Applicants must have an invention disclosure on file with the USC Stevens Center for Innovation for the technology described in the proposal; technologies with intellectual property under an active option or license agreement are generally not eligible.

**Startup Launch:** USC alumni may participate in the Startup Launch initiative if they join a team whose application is submitted by a USC student, faculty, or staff member.

**Early Career Innovator:** USC student recipients must be actively enrolled as USC students for the full duration of the initiative period. Students who graduate or otherwise separate from the university before or during the award period are no longer eligible to receive funds. For example, graduating seniors are not eligible if their degree is conferred prior to or during the award term.

**Early Career Innovator – Techstars:** Graduating seniors must be actively enrolled as a USC student to apply but may complete their 3-month experience with a USC-affiliated started immediately following their graduation.

## PROPOSAL REQUIREMENTS

Submit your proposal application utilizing the OORI application portal [here](#). Applicants must carefully follow instructions. Information uploaded beyond what is requested will not be reviewed.

- a) **Program Initiative:** Select one of the designated initiatives listed above.
- b) **Proposal:** (not to exceed 2 pages): Page limits are inclusive of figures and tables and include 1” margins of single-spaced text in Arial font. Specific instructions per initiative are as follows:

Initiative	Proposal Requirements
<b>Innovation Empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a concise description of the project’s significance and innovation, identify the USC PI or Co-PIs who will serve as faculty mentor(s), and outline the approach and anticipated outcomes.</li> <li>• Clearly state the roles and expertise of the team, describe how milestones will be achieved, and, if applicable, indicate potential paths toward translation or commercialization.</li> <li>• Explain how faculty will support and guide students in leading research or entrepreneurial activities that extend beyond existing faculty projects.</li> </ul>
<b>Stevens Translation Catalyst</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a lay abstract, a clear technical description of the project, a description of the anticipated product types and addressable market, and current stage of development</li> <li>• Describe how Translation Award funding will enable critical proof-of-concept or validation activities and what milestones may be achieved using this funding. Identify the USC PI or Co-PIs who will lead the work.</li> <li>• Describe key milestones using this funding and what milestones need to be achieved for commercialization. Outline the planned path toward licensing and/or startup formation.</li> <li>• Clearly identify any IP that has been disclosed to USC Stevens Center and explain how the proposed work builds on the technology behind that IP.</li> </ul>
<b>Startup Launch</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe the venture concept and its potential impact, including the problem being addressed, target market, and anticipated social or economic value.</li> <li>• Outline the founding team’s roles and relevant expertise, specify the early operational needs to be supported (e.g., legal services, incorporation, IP protection, business services), and explain how these resources will accelerate venture formation and growth.</li> <li>• Present near-term milestones and a plan for sustainability or next steps beyond the initial award period.</li> </ul>
<b>Early Career Innovator</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Submit a cover letter in which you:</li> <li>• Identify and rank order up to three USC startups with which you would like to work. Companies can be selected from the list located <a href="#">here</a>.</li> <li>• Describe qualifications, prior experiences, and suitability for participation in this initiative.</li> <li>• Highlight skills and perspectives the applicant will bring to a startup environment, explain how the experience will support their professional and</li> </ul>

	entrepreneurial development, and demonstrate how their involvement would strengthen and align with the USC-affiliated companies they may work with.
<b>Early Career Innovator – Techstars</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Submit a cover letter in which you:</li> <li>• Describe qualifications, prior experiences, and suitability for participation in this initiative.</li> <li>• Highlight skills and perspectives the applicant will bring to a startup environment, explain how the experience will support their professional and entrepreneurial development, and demonstrate how their involvement would strengthen and align with the USC-affiliated companies they may work with.</li> </ul>

- c) **Budget and Budget Justification** (not to exceed 2 pages):
- Innovation Empowerment:** Specify a project start and end date. Utilize standard budget categories.
  - Stevens Translation Catalyst:** Utilize standard budget categories.
  - Startup Launch:** Specify a project start and end date. Utilize standard budget categories.
  - Early Career Innovator:** Not applicable, leave blank
  - Early Career Innovator – Techstars:** Not applicable, leave blank
- d) **Curriculum Vitae** (≤5 pages per Co-PI/Co-I): Applicants may use any standardized CV format (e.g., NIH Biographical Sketch, NSF Biographical Sketch, etc.).

## FURTHER INFORMATION AND PROGRAM CONTACT INFORMATION

We encourage inquiries to RII concerning this funding opportunity and welcome the opportunity to answer questions from potential applicants. For additional information or inquiries, please send an email to [rii@usc.edu](mailto:rii@usc.edu) with “Early Career Innovator Award” in the subject line.

## GRANT CONDITIONS

- Awardees under the *Innovation Empowerment* initiative will be required to sign a pledge indicating a commitment to stay connected with the USC Innovation Ecosystem and informing USC of ventures that said outside investment in the future and to remain open to discussions regarding potential USC participation, which may include participation rights or provision of equity.
- Awardees under the *Startup Launch* initiative, applicant company must engage with the USC Stevens Center for Innovation to determine whether any USC intellectual property is involved. If relevant, applicants will be required to complete the appropriate license or option agreement with USC before the award can be granted.
- Awardees under the Stevens Translation Catalyst will be required to deliver a final written report and in-person or zoom presentation to Stevens team and other possible guests covering the project and the pathway to commercialization for the technology.
- Awards include fringe benefits but are not assessed as Facilities & Administration Costs.
- If a faculty member has a financial relationship with the outside company, they must disclose this in diSClose prior to award (<https://disclose.usc.edu>). If any related research will take place at USC, an approved management plan must also be in place prior to receipt of the award. Teams forming start-ups must also submit a conflict-of-interest disclosure. Questions regarding conflict of interest and disclosures can be directed to Ben Bell in the Office of Compliance ([benjamab@usc.edu](mailto:benjamab@usc.edu)).
- Upon award notification, and as a condition of funding, awardees must provide OORI with the name, title, and email of a USC senior business official who will establish the internal account for transfer of OORI funds.
- Within one month of being notified by OORI that an award will be made, and as a condition of funding, awardees will provide OORI with an account number and enable view access for the account, such that OORI staff will be able to view the account balance. If this information is not provided to RII within this timeframe, OORI may elect to rescind the award and use the funds to make an award to another applicant.
- This award will not provide financial support beyond the duration of the award and does not carry the opportunity for renewal.
- Funds not spent by the end of the project period will be returned to OORI.

- Awardees have discretion in budgeting and re-budgeting funds to meet their research needs within the fund's guidelines and the terms of the proposal. However, funds may not be transferred to another project or other researchers or institutions.
- All USC rules concerning conflict of interest, human subject research, animal research, etc., apply to projects funded under this program. Funding will only be provided following confirmation that all pertinent reviews have been submitted for approval by relevant committees (e.g., IRB, IACUC).

### **REVIEW PROCESS**

To expedite decisions and reflect changes in staffing levels and services, the review process has been streamlined. Proposals will be reviewed by senior OORI leaders, including but not limited to the Senior Vice President for Research and Innovation, and subject-matter experts as appropriate. Reviews will consider overall project quality, alignment with USC priorities, potential for future impact and external funding, and anticipated ROI in research and scholarship, including the potential of curiosity-driven work to open new avenues of inquiry. ROI may be defined in financial or non-financial terms, as specified and justified by the applicant.

### **REPORTING AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF SUPPORT**

Awardees must submit a one-page progress report at six months and at the end of the project period. Reports should summarize scientific, financial, and research and scholarship progress, and highlight movement toward the identified funding target (e.g., submissions, scores, awards, partnerships).

### **PROGRAM CONTACT INFORMATION**

For additional information or inquiries, please email [rii@usc.edu](mailto:rii@usc.edu).

## Q&A – USC STEVENS TRANSLATION CATALYST

### Q: What types of translational projects are eligible for Stevens Translation Award funding?

A: Translation Award funding supports projects that advance USC-owned intellectual property toward commercialization by generating critical proof-of-concept or validation data. Examples of eligible translational work include:

- **Biomedical / Life Sciences**
  - Generating preliminary human or clinical data for diagnostic technologies
  - Conducting target validation for therapeutic candidates
  - Performing medicinal chemistry optimization or compound screening for new drug candidates
  - Evaluating in vivo efficacy or safety for lead therapeutic candidates
  - Developing and validating prototypes for medical devices in vivo
- **Physical Sciences / Engineering / Computing**
  - Developing a minimum viable product (MVP) or prototype for software, hardware, or AI models
  - Conducting real-world implementation or pilot deployments (e.g., industrial, environmental, or user settings)
  - Scaling up processes or optimizing manufacturing of new materials or devices
  - Demonstrating system performance, durability, or reliability under operational conditions

### Q: Who is eligible to apply, and what intellectual property requirements must be met?

A: Faculty who have submitted an invention or copyright disclosure with USC Stevens covering the technology in the proposal. The IP must be owned by USC and preference given to projects with solely owned USC IP (i.e. IP that is not jointly owned with any other entity).

### Q: How can Translation Award funds be used, and are there any restrictions on allowable expenses?

A: Must be used directly for experiments. CROs may be used, but preference will be for research conducted in USC labs.

### Q: What are the expectations for funded projects in terms of milestones, reporting, and next steps toward commercialization?

A: Projects should include milestones that are achievable given the funding and that will move a project that has already had a foundation of research to the next stage toward commercialization. While interim reports are not required, a final report as well as a presentation to the Stevens Center for Innovation team and other USC guests describing both the research and the path to commercialization are required.

## Q&A – EARLY CAREER INNOVATOR

### Q: What is the difference between the *Early Career Innovator* and *Early Career Innovator-Techstars* initiatives?

A: Both provide a 3-month experience with a USC-affiliated startup.

- **Early Career Innovator:** Students are matched with USC-affiliated startups across a wide range of industries.
- **Early Career Innovator–Techstars:** Students are matched specifically with one of the USC-affiliated startups selected to participate in the USC Techstars Accelerator.

### Q: What is the timing for the Early Career Innovator initiative?

A: The initiative runs for three months, approximately February through May 2026. Exact dates will be announced closer to the program start. For the Early Career Innovator - Techstars Initiative, graduating seniors must be actively enrolled as a USC student to apply, but may complete their 3-month experience with a USC-affiliated started immediately following their graduation.

### Q: Do I need to participate for the entire 3-month period?

A: Yes. Full participation for the entire 3-month duration is required.

### Q: How does the program facilitate a match between students and USC-affiliated startups?

A: As part of the application, students rank up to three USC-affiliated startups from the provided list. OORI then shares application materials with the startups in rank order to determine interest. If a startup wishes to interview, the student will be notified and may schedule the meeting. If both the student and startup agree to proceed after the interview, the match is confirmed, and the award is made.

**Q: What if I don't successfully match with any of my top 3 ranked companies?**

A: If a match is not made with your ranked companies, OORI will work to connect you with other USC startups that are seeking interns, should you wish to be considered for those opportunities.

**Q: How are students paid under the Early Career Innovator initiative?**

A: Upon successful match, \$5,000 will be transferred to the USC faculty member associated with the startup. The faculty member then processes payment on a monthly basis to the student in accordance with their department's policies.

**Q: If I apply, am I guaranteed to be matched with a company?**

A: A match is not guaranteed. Our team will work closely with both applicants and startups to facilitate placements, but final matches depend on mutual interest and availability.

### **Q&A – EARLY CAREER INNOVATOR - TECHSTARS**

**Q: What is the timing for the Early Career Innovator–Techstars initiative?**

A: The initiative follows the USC Techstars Accelerator schedule, which runs from March through May 2026. Exact dates will be announced closer to the program start.

**Q: Do I need to participate for the entire 3-month period?**

A: Yes. Full participation for the entire 3-month duration is required.

**Q: What is the difference between the *Early Career Innovator* and *Early Career Innovator-Techstars* initiatives?**

A: Both provide a 3-month experience with a USC-affiliated startup.

- **Early Career Innovator:** Students are matched with USC-affiliated startups across a wide range of industries.
- **Early Career Innovator–Techstars:** Students are matched specifically with one of the USC-affiliated startups selected to participate in the USC Techstars Accelerator.

**Q: How does the program facilitate a match between students and USC Techstars accelerator company?**

A: The USC Techstars team reviews all applications to identify potential matches with participating companies. Selected applicants will be invited to interview, and if both the student and company agree, the student will be placed with that company.

**Q: How are students paid under the Early Career Innovator-Techstars initiative?**

A: USC Techstars will facilitate payments to students directly.

### **Q&A – STARTUP LAUNCH**

**Q: I am a USC alum – am I eligible to apply under the Startup Launch initiative?**

A: Applications must be led by a current USC student, faculty, or staff member. USC alumni are welcome to participate as part of a team but cannot apply independently.

**Q: What kinds of ventures are eligible?**

A: All types of ventures are welcome, including technology, life sciences, social impact, consumer products, and creative industries. Teams should demonstrate a clear concept, problem/solution fit, and commitment to moving the venture forward.

**Q: What kind of activities can these funds support?**

A: These funds will support the earliest stage of company formation, including but not limited to, entity incorporation, drafting and filing of documents, partial legal oversight, tax ID generation and associated financial filings.

**Q: Can I apply if my idea is still very early?**

A: Yes, the intention of the initiative is to enable companies at the earliest stages of development to startup a company. However, their company should have a path towards commercialization and have been minimally de-risked to demonstrate viability.

**Q: Can I apply if I already have outside funding?**

A: Yes, you may apply if outside funding has already been attained, however there must be justification for why that money was not used to startup the company. For example, if outside funds were used primarily to support research, leading to a potential commercial opportunity.