

**Melanoma and Skin Cancer Program (MSCP) SPORE
Hillman Cancer Center, University of Pittsburgh**

Announcing the 2025-2026 RFP for

**DEVELOPMENTAL RESEARCH PROGRAM (DRP) AWARDS
CAREER ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM (CEP) AWARDS**

The **MSCP SPORE** is pleased to announce our 2025-2026 RFP for **CEP and DRP applications** with a planned funding start date of **July 1, 2025**. Funded projects will receive up to **\$50,000 TDC** for a period of one year, with the possibility of competitive renewal for a second year of funding based on YR1 study progress and a novel prospective research program. We plan to fund up to 5 total CEP/DRP applications in the 2025-2026 MSCP SPORE fiscal period.

CEP and DRP projects must have *promising translational research potential that is applicable to human skin cancer*. Furthermore, successful proposals are expected to evolve into new full projects containing a clear translational component suitable for prospective funding opportunities within the MSCP SPORE or as NIH R01 or equivalent grant applications.

Career Enhancement Program Awards are intended to support research led by new investigators who are committed to multidisciplinary studies in melanoma and other skin cancers, with an interest in making impactful biological discoveries in human melanoma and skin cancer risk, prevention, diagnosis, prognosis or treatment. CEP awards are expected to enhance the career development of individuals committed to cutaneous oncology research. Applicants must be within 5 years of their initial appointment as an Assistant Professor or be senior non-faculty members with promise to be appointed at the level of Assistant Professor within the tenure of the CEP award period.

Developmental Research Program Awards provide seed funding to explore promising novel research in melanoma and other skin cancers, particularly by established investigators who are not currently engaged in research in this area. Major areas of interest include research applicable to human melanoma and skin cancer risk, prevention, diagnosis, prognosis, or treatment. DRP-eligible investigators are typically established faculty with a track record of research productivity. These may include faculty who currently lead skin cancer research programs but who wish to test an idea *clearly distinct from current or pending grants*. Applicant PIs may also lead programs that are not currently directed at skin cancer but have interest in exploring the applicability of their novel investigational paradigms in the setting of skin cancer.

Previous recipients of MSCP SPORE CEP/DRP funds are generally ineligible to be PIs of new projects within 3 years of completing their previous funding period.

Intent to submit a proposal should be indicated via email by April 30, 2025 (kellyc23@upmc.edu), with the deadline to submit full applications being 5:00 p.m. (EST) on May 31, 2025. All questions pertaining to this RFP or to general aspects of MSCP SPORE CEP and DRP awards should be directed via e-mail to CEP/DRP Co-Directors Drs. Walter J Storkus (storkuswj@upmc.edu), Hassane M Zarour (zarourhm@upmc.edu) or John M Kirkwood (kirkwoodjm@upmc.edu).

The MSCP SPORE is committed to diversity of trainees and mentors and encourages applications from all communities at the University of Pittsburgh and its affiliated Institutions.

2025-2026 MSCP SPORE

CAREER ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM (CEP) & DEVELOPMENTAL RESEARCH PROGRAM (DRP) APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS

SUBMISSION DEADLINE: The deadline for submission of CEP and DRP applications to this RFP is **May 31, 2025 at 5:00 PM (EST)**. Completed applications containing all required components are to be directed to Ms. Cait Kelly via email (kellyc23@upmc.edu) as a single PDF document.

ANTICIPATED FUNDING DATE: **July 1, 2025**

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

DRP and CEP proposals are expected to address *significant/impactful questions relevant to the understanding of human melanoma and skin cancers and their effective diagnosis, prevention and/or treatment*. Funded proposals must have clear translational potential and have promise to develop into mature projects suitable for funding either within the context of the MSCP SPORE mechanism or as independent R01 or R01-equivalent grants.

Career Enhancement Program Awards will provide support for new investigators with interest in developing productive careers in cutaneous oncology and other scientists committed to multidisciplinary studies investigating the relevance of biological discoveries in human skin cancer risk, prevention, diagnosis, prognosis or treatment.

Developmental Research Program Awards are intended to support a broad spectrum of innovative pilot projects applicable to human melanoma and skin cancer risk, prevention, diagnosis, prognosis or treatment. DRP applicants are typically more established PIs who may or may not have active research programs in cutaneous oncology, but who have interest in testing new paradigms in the setting of skin cancer or applying established paradigms for the first time in skin cancer models.

All successful projects must fit within the MSCP SPORE mission of promoting basic research and clinical investigations that exhibit short-term or medium-term translational impact in cutaneous oncology, including melanoma and non-melanoma skin cancers.

Categories of Eligible Investigators:

CEP eligible investigators are typically new investigators with interest in developing productive careers in cutaneous oncology and other scientists committed to multidisciplinary studies investigating the relevance of biological discoveries in human skin cancer risk, prevention, diagnosis, prognosis, or treatment.

DRP eligible investigators are typically established faculty with a track record of research productivity. These may include faculty who currently lead skin cancer research programs but who wish to test an idea *clearly distinct from current or pending grants*. Applicant PIs may also lead programs not currently directed towards skin cancer but have interest in exploring the applicability of their investigational paradigms to skin cancer.

Funding priority will be given to projects that include i.) multidisciplinary collaborations with current MSCP SPORE investigators or investigators at other institutions who are members of alternate NCI-supported Melanoma and/or Skin Cancer SPOREs, and/or ii.) that plan to use MSCP SPORE Core Facilities and Resources. For additional details

regarding ongoing MSCP SPORE Projects and Core facilities, please refer to the following link (https://trp.cancer.gov/spores/abstracts/pitt_skin.htm).

Previous recipients of MSCP SPORE CEP/DRP funds are generally ineligible to be recipients of new CEP projects within 3 years of completing their previous period of funding.

Note: Eligible applicants at the University of Pittsburgh, the UPMC Hillman Cancer Center, local Pittsburgh academic institutions (Carlow College, Carnegie Mellon University, Chatham University) and Regional Melanoma Consortium (RMC) institutions including Case Western Reserve University/Cleveland Clinic, Ohio State University, Penn State Cancer Institute and Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center may apply to this RFP. If approved for funding, up to \$50K/year (**TDC only, indirect costs are not allowed**) will be provided to support study performance.

CEP/DRP Application Format

1. **Title Page** including **Project Title, PI name/affiliation, Abstract** (one-half page) and indication of “**CEP Award Application**” or “**DRP Award Application**”.
2. **NIH biosketch** for each investigator, including current and pending research support, with % efforts for each, explanation of any scientific or budgetary overlap and how such overlaps will be resolved if a CEP/DRP award is received.
3. Detailed **Budget** (up to \$50,000 for 1 year) and **Budget Justification** for the proposed work to begin **July 1, 2025**. The budget should describe how funds will be allocated between collaborating investigators/institutions. Allowed expenses include salary support for investigators and lab personnel, equipment (requests for items costing >\$1,000 will be scrutinized particularly closely), supplies, animals/animal care, and patient-related expenses, including necessary lab tests (which may include negotiated contracts for such services). *The **Business Manager** from each department with personnel on the project must **sign** the budget page, thereby verifying that the indicated % efforts are/will be available to the investigator.* Note: Final approved budgets for funded projects will be determined by the SPORE Executive Committee.
4. **Project Narrative:**

Format is Arial 11, with 0.5” margins all around. **A page limit of four (4) pages**, excluding references, will be strictly enforced. **Supplementary material will not be accepted.**

The project narrative should include NIH-style **Specific Aims, Background, Preliminary Results, Experimental Design** (with a projected timetable for conducting the proposed studies) and **References**. In addition, **the narrative must briefly address the project’s translational potential** (i.e., how and when the project might reasonably be applied to human skin cancer risk, prevention, diagnosis, prognosis or treatment).

CEP/DRP applications should indicate: **a.) current status of all institutional IACUC/IRB approvals** required for performance of their proposed research (i.e. *final funding of approved projects will be contingent on these approvals*); **b.) any proposed or potential collaborative associations** with other investigators at the University of Pittsburgh or outside institutions (particularly with members of Skin Cancer SPOREs); **c.) any links of participating investigators to commercial entities**; if such associations exist, the individuals involved must provide written assurance that these interactions will uphold the principles of academic freedom, including their ability (and the ability of those associated with this work) to freely collaborate, including unrestricted exchange of research materials, and also that they will adhere to the intellectual property rights of the SPORE under NIH funding agreements and

the Bayh-Dole Act requirements; **d.) a statement of how the project will interact with current MSCP SPORE Projects and/or implement MSCP SPORE Core Facilities/Resources.**

(For CEP applications only: no page limits): Applicants should identify a CEP scientific/career mentor(s) affiliated with the MSCP SPORE at the University of Pittsburgh (for applicants from outside institutions, a CEP mentorship team including a host institution mentor and an MSCP SPORE member mentor is required). **NIH biographical sketches and letters of support should be provided by mentors for inclusion in the application.**

Applicants should also provide: **a.) an applicant career plan** describing the candidate's earlier career and training, long-term goals, and planned CEP activities including research, formal elements of training possibly including coursework, proposed mentors and their specific roles in career development, and apportionment of training and career activities within the context of ongoing clinical and research responsibilities; **b.) a description of the expected impact of CEP Award on the applicant's career development as a translational cancer scientist;** **c.) a letter from the sponsoring Departmental or Section Chair** describing institutional commitments to the candidate's career development; **d.) two additional letters of recommendation** supporting the applicant's career potential as a cutaneous oncology investigator.

(For DRP applications only: no page limits): The PI should **a.) describe why a DRP Award is essential to the proposed research,** and **b.) provide a letter of endorsement** from the applicant's Department Chair if the applicant does not have a track record of R01 or equivalent funding.

Note: Revised CEP/DRP applications must include a preface response-to-critique (up to 1 page in length which does not count against the 4-page application limit) addressing all major concerns voiced in the previous round of review.

CEP/DRP Review Criteria

All CEP/DRP applications will be evaluated in a study section format for Significance (relevance to SPORE programmatic needs), Approach (experimental design; translational relevance, impact on multidisciplinary and/or inter-institutional collaborations), Innovation (risk to impact ratio, potential impact on MSCP SPORE and translational cutaneous oncology) and Investigators (including commitment to translational cutaneous oncology and probability of the study eventually developing into a proposal competitive for alternative funding; e.g., an R01 grant or equivalent). Applications from PIs at outside institutions will also be assessed for their supportive research environment.

Additional CEP review criteria include the candidate's: 1.) potential for becoming a productive investigator, including the quality and impact of previous and planned research activities; 2.) potential to compete successfully for external funding to support their research in cutaneous oncology (either as an independent PI or an essential member of a research team); 3.) CEP mentorship team credentials/expertise, 4.) potential for productive and synergistic collaborations at the University of Pittsburgh and/or outside institutions (with involvement of other SPORE's representing a SPORE FOA priority); 5.) degree of home institutional commitment; and 6.) career development plan (including relationships/contributions from mentors). **Note: When deemed necessary, the MSCP SPORE Executive Committee may choose to further evaluate CEP applicants with an interview.**

Applications will be prioritized for funding based in part on whether they a) encompass multidisciplinary collaborative research; b) employ MSCP SPORE Core facilities; and/or c) involve collaborating investigators at other institutions who are participants in alternate SPOREs focused on Skin Cancer.

NOTE: All funded projects are initially awarded for a period of 1 year. Extensions for a second year of support will be considered upon submission of a competitive renewal application documenting satisfactory progress and a detailing a novel second year research plan and budget. Renewal applications will be evaluated on a competitive basis along with new CEP/DRP applications.

Responsibilities of FUNDED CEP/DRP PROJECTS/PIs

- 1.) Research and financial progress reports must be submitted annually, with deadlines provided to the PI when the awards begin.
- 2.) Principal Investigators (PIs) of funded projects will be required to **present their research findings to the MSCP SPORE membership** ~4-6 months after completion of the initial funding period at one of the regularly scheduled monthly SPORE Research-In-Progress (RIP) meetings. Accommodations will be made for presentations that are either face-to-face or virtual.
- 3.) The MSCP SPORE Executive Committee is authorized to consider premature termination of funded CEP/DRP projects based on: 1.) pre-term completion of the project and/or PI receipt of outside funding for similar work during the funding period; 2.) clear evidence that the project's stated goals (including translational goals) are not feasible; 3.) clear evidence of inappropriate use of allocated funds. Before a project can be formally terminated, the project investigators will be informed in writing that the Executive Committee is contemplating termination, and the reason(s) for considering this action.

Please address all questions regarding this RFP via e-mail to MSCP SPORE CEP/DRP Co-Director Dr. Walter J Storkus (storkuswj@upmc.edu) and MSCP SPORE Administrator Ms. Cait Kelly (kellyc23@upmc.edu).

Specialized Programs of Research Excellence (SPOREs) in Skin Cancer are funded by the National Cancer Institute.