



Ralph L. Sacco Scholars Program 2026 Request for Proposals (RFP)

We are delighted to announce the third offering of The Ralph L. Sacco Scholarship Program in Brain Health ("The Sacco Scholars"), a transformative career development opportunity jointly funded by the American Academy of Neurology (AAN) and the American Heart Association/American Stroke Association (the Heart Association). Dr. Sacco was the leader of the Division of Cerebrovascular Disease at Columbia University and subsequently Chair of the Department of Neurology at the University of Miami; he served as President of both the American Heart Association and the American Academy of Neurology. This prestigious scholarship aims to honor his legacy by empowering selected leaders in the next generation of researchers and practitioners, with a focus on the prevention of brain diseases and advancement of brain health across the lifespan for all. The focus areas may change from year to year, depending on the evolving needs and priorities within the rapidly growing field of brain health.

The Sacco Scholars Program offers a unique opportunity for early career trainees to undertake a mentored two-year research project targeting various aspects of brain health. The scholarship program is designed to encompass inclusivity and to foster varied perspectives. In the current call for proposals, we welcome submissions from postdoctoral (MD, PhD, DrPH, DNP, or equivalent doctoral degree) applicants who are (or will be) in postdoctoral fellowship training with a focus on brain health beginning July 1, 2026.

Projects eligible for this cycle of funding should focus on prevention, with a clear connection to either neurological or mental/behavioral health. A connection to cardiovascular or cerebrovascular health is also desirable, though not required (e.g., depression as a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, post-stroke anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder after cardiac arrest). The program's scope of brain health emphasizes preventive approaches across the lifespan and encompasses a wide range of areas including healthy brain development and aging; attaining and maintaining optimal cognitive function and mental well-being; cognitive aging, decline, and dementia; and primordial, primary, and secondary prevention of neurological and mental health disorders. Scientific domains eligible for funding include translational, clinical, and population sciences. Translational research projects should have a clear and near-term application to clinical implementation. Following are examples of

areas of interest: epidemiology, health services research, community awareness and education, psychiatry, mental health and well-being, pediatrics, and adverse childhood experiences. Projects may apply to any age of the lifespan, from fetal/childhood development to adulthood and late life.

Research projects should be hypothesis-driven, with clear objectives and testable hypotheses related to brain health. In addition, the proposal should outline a comprehensive training plan, tailored to the trainee's career level, demonstrating how this mentored project will contribute to their professional development and establishing their career in brain health.

Each candidate must be supported by a primary mentor with appropriate expertise to guide them through the project. Mentors should possess doctoral or equivalent level training and hold a faculty or staff appointment at the sponsoring institution.

This postdoctoral fellowship level award consists of a total commitment of \$150,000 over the two-year fellowship and includes: 1) \$65,000 per year for two years toward the trainee salary and fringe, (2) \$10,000 per year stipend to support research-related expenses. In addition, awardees will be reimbursed for reasonable travel expenses for their attendance at both the Heart Association's International Stroke Conference and the AAN's Annual Meeting.

Funding for the Sacco Scholars Program is derived from a generous bequest from Dr. Ralph L. Sacco. The AAN and the Heart Association will collaboratively establish the number of scholarships to be awarded each year. A joint committee, comprising leaders and representatives from both organizations, will oversee the Request for Proposals process and select the recipients annually.

In addition to the scholarship awards, the funds will also support annual gatherings during national meetings of the AAN and the Heart Association, such as the AAN Annual Meeting and the Heart Association's International Stroke Conference. These gatherings will bring together current and former Sacco Scholars to present their research findings, engage in discussions on career development, and network with esteemed members of the joint committee and other influential leaders in the field of brain health. These gatherings will provide an enduring framework for the Sacco Scholars community with the goal to advance the field of brain health. The inclusion of Lawrence Brass Clinical Research Training Scholarship awardees in these gatherings will foster collaboration and shared knowledge, honoring the legacies of both Dr. Ralph L. Sacco and Dr. Lawrence Brass, who both made significant contributions to their fields before passing away at a young age from cancer.

Important Notes:

- Although a joint effort of the American Heart Association and the American Academy of Neurology, applicants will utilize the Heart Association's grant proposal system (Proposal Central) to apply.
- Proposals must be received no later than 3 p.m. Central Time on the deadline date. Early submission is encouraged.
- Before beginning a proposal, review the eligibility and requirements that apply to all Association research awards at [Heart Association Application Resources](#) page.
- All non-US citizen/permanent resident applicants must have an active visa at the time of application and award start date (July 1, 2026); if applicants do not have a visa the award will be forfeited.
- All proposals must be [submitted electronically via Proposal Central](#). The system will open eight weeks prior to the deadline to complete your proposal and upload documents. You can begin to create your documents now; please refer to the [Heart Association Application Instructions \(PDF\)](#). All submissions require a signature from a designated institutional representative.
- Applicants must be [Heart Association Professional Members](#) or [members of the American Academy of Neurology](#) at the time of application. The membership process must be completed online well before the submission deadline.

Key Dates:

RFP published:	Wednesday, November 26, 2025
Proposal deadline:	Thursday, January 29, 2026
Peer Review:	March 2026
Notifications to applicants/awardees:	by April 17, 2026
Awards start date:	July 1, 2026

Purpose

The purpose of this award opportunity is to enhance the training of postdoctoral trainees who are not yet independent. To ensure success, the applicant must have

access to the institutional environment, support, and relevant scientific guidance of a primary research mentor appropriate for the trainee's level of career development. Recognizing the unique challenges that clinicians, in particular, experience in balancing research and clinical activity, this award mechanism aims to be as flexible as possible to enable applicants to develop academic careers in research alongside fulfilling clinical service commitments.

- The trainee and mentor should work collaboratively to develop a thoughtfully planned, systematic proposal aimed at clearly answering an investigative question in brain health research (5-page limit). The applicant must have primary responsibility for the writing and the preparation of the proposal, understanding that the mentor will play a significant part in providing guidance to the applicant. Because the fellow receives only a stipend from the award, additional monetary support for the proposed work **MUST** come from the mentor's laboratory. Therefore, the proposal will likely be related to the mentor's currently funded work. The mentor should clarify the role the applicant played in developing the proposal, the relationship of the proposal to ongoing work in the mentor's laboratory, and how the proposal will contribute toward the training and career development of the applicant.
- A new fellow may not have had adequate time to generate preliminary data; therefore, applicants may present preliminary data generated by the mentor. The assessment of preliminary data, whether generated by the mentor or the applicant, should be put into perspective so that bold new ideas and risk taking by beginning investigators are encouraged rather than stymied. Submission of a proposal to the American Heart Association or the American Academy of Neurology with identical or significantly similar content as a submission by another investigator is prohibited. Also, the submission of a proposal with identical or significantly similar content from a mentor to a grant program or his/her fellow to another fellowship program is prohibited. In such cases, both proposals may be removed from funding consideration. If a separate grant proposal is submitted by the mentor of a fellowship applicant, both applications may be funded if there is no duplication of aims.

Eligibility

- At the time of award activation, the applicant must hold a post-baccalaureate PhD degree or equivalent, or a doctoral-level clinical degree such as MD, DO, DNP, DVM, PharmD, DDS, DrPH, or PhD in nursing, public health or other clinical health science.
- At the time of award activation, the applicant may have had no more than five years of research training or experience since obtaining a post-baccalaureate doctoral-level degree (excluding clinical training).

- The awardee will be expected to devote at least 80 percent of full-time work either to research or to activities pursuant to independent research (instead of administrative or clinical duties that are not an integral part of the research training program, or teaching responsibilities).
- This award is not intended for individuals of faculty rank.

Exceptions:

- MD or MD/PhD with clinical responsibilities who need instructor or similar title to see patients, but who will devote at least 80% full-time to research training.
- RN/PhD with a clinical appointment. The awardee will be expected to devote his/her time to research, or activities directly related to development into an independent researcher. All other eligibility criteria apply.
- Except for US citizens and permanent residents, awardees must maintain an accepted visa throughout the duration of the award. Please refer to [Heart Association Application Resources](#) for acceptable visa types.

Mentor/Sponsor

It is imperative that the scholar receive counsel and direction from a dedicated primary mentor who is an established investigator (as outlined in the peer review criteria for the mentor/training plan below) invested in the progress of the project and their mentee's overall career development.

The Heart Association does not require but strongly encourages institutions to develop and use Individual Development Plans (IDPs) for training programs. IDPs provide a structure for the identification and achievement of career goals.

The trainee's career goals, as stated in "Part A – Personal Statement" of the fellow's biosketch, and the training plan must be complementary to one another and focused specifically on the individual. A standardized training plan will not be viewed favorably.

References

Each applicant must obtain two reference documents (one from the mentor, plus another professional reference who knows the candidate well). Those providing the references must upload them into Proposal Central by the deadline date. The proposal cannot be submitted without the reference reports. Besides the reference

from the mentor, a co-mentor, collaborating investigator or consultant contributing to the project may not serve as a referent.

A referent is an individual familiar with the applicant's scientific interests and abilities. Letters should be composed by the referent and should not originate from the applicant. Any appearance of substantially similar language in reference letters will be factored into the score for the Mentor and Environment, which will impact the overall score. Please visit the [Reference Information page](#) for information about the reference upload process and to download a template of the Reference Report form.

Budget:

Annual Stipend

\$65,000 per year for two years.

Note: a portion of the stipend may be used to cover some of the cost of health insurance.

Project Support

\$10,000 per year, in addition to the stipend. No limit on any line item (computer, equipment, lab supplies, travel, etc.).

Travel Support

In addition to the salary stipend and project support, each Sacco Scholar will receive reimbursement of reasonable travel expenses for attendance at the Heart Association's International Stroke Conference (February) and the AAN Annual Meeting (April). This reimbursement will be paid to the institution following attendance by the Sacco Scholar.

Note: No indirect costs are paid on the scholarships.

Award Duration

Two years. Please note there is a maximum of two years of Sacco Scholarship support per individual. These awards are non-renewable.

Required Documents (must be uploaded as PDFs into Proposal Central)

1. Research proposal (up to 5 pages)
2. Literature cited (no limitation on page number)
3. Training plan (up to 3 pages)
4. Department Chair statement (one page maximum): This must include the Chair's commitment of 80 percent of the scholar's full-time effort to research and/or to activities pursuant to independent research.

5. Mentor's support letter (up to 2 pages).
6. Mentor's reference report (two pages, uploaded by the mentor).
7. Additional reference report (two pages, must be uploaded by the person providing the reference).
8. Applicant biosketch (use NIH 5-page format)
9. Mentor biosketch (use NIH 5-page format)

Restrictions

- An applicant may submit only one Sacco Scholarship application per deadline.
- The Sacco Scholars program allows supplementation from other sources to meet the sponsoring institution's stipend and benefit levels; however, the awardee may not hold a comparable award (such as an NIH K award or other career development award) as a source of supplementation.
- The awardee must resign the award if promoted to a full-time faculty position prior to completion of the first year of the program. The awardee may hold this award in its second year if promoted to a full-time faculty position after completion of the first year; the awardee must still devote 80% of effort to research activities during that second year of the award.
- A postdoctoral fellow may not hold another comparable career development award concurrently. However, the awardee may apply for a subsequent award during the last year of the project and must resign the postdoctoral scholarship if another award is activated during the Sacco Scholarship period.

Use of Large Language Models and Generative AI in Proposals & Peer Review

The applicant must disclose whether a large language model (LLM – e.g., ChatGPT) or a generative artificial intelligence tool was used to create and/or edit content in research proposals submitted for funding. This information must be disclosed at the time of submission. Disclosure of this information does not impact peer review. Should this information not be disclosed accurately, and use of these tools is identified, the proposal may be administratively withdrawn.

Biosketch Addition: Inclusive, safe environment

Mentors are to include a statement in the Personal Statement section of their biographical sketch that explicitly states how they contribute to a safe and inclusive work environment. In addition, mentors on Fellowships, Career Development Awards,

and Supplement awards should complete recognized training specific to sexual and gender-based harassment.

Application Resources to help complete your submission

Find your questions, answered in one convenient place and applicable resources at the touch of a click.

[See a full list of Q&A to navigate your way through the application process.](#)

There will be a webinar offered for interested applicants available before the deadline. The webinar will be recorded and posted on the RFP website.

Peer Review Criteria

An applicant is prohibited from contacting American Heart Association or AAN peer reviewers. This is a form of scientific misconduct and will result in the removal of the application from funding consideration and institutional notification of misconduct.
Peer Reviewers: *The American Heart Association DOES NOT permit the use of a large language model (LLM – e.g., ChatGPT) or an artificial intelligence tool to generate and/or edit content in peer review critiques. Uploading of any portion of a research proposal into a large language model (LLM – e.g., ChatGPT) or an artificial intelligence tool to assist in writing a critique of the proposal is explicitly prohibited as it is a violation of the [Heart Association Peer Reviewer Certification Statement](#) (to include confidentiality, non-disclosure, and conflict of interest).*

The Heart Association and the AAN reserve the right to an initial review, whereby a minimum of half of the submissions may be triaged.

To judge the merit of the application, reviewers will comment on the following criteria. Please address these in your proposal. Each criterion will account for one-third of the overall score. The Heart Association uses a 1-9 score scale.

Criterion 1 – Evaluation of the Summary for Non-Scientists – 5%

American Heart Association Mission: *To be a relentless force for a world of longer, healthier lives.*

AAN Mission: *To promote the highest quality patient-centered neurologic care and enhance member career satisfaction.*

1. How well does the Non-Scientist Summary explain to a non-scientist audience the importance of research proposed and its relevance to advancement of the field of brain health?
2. Does the Non-Scientist Summary adequately explain the major problem being addressed by this study and how is it relevant to brain health?
3. Does it provide specific scientific questions and how the projects will address them?
4. Does it provide information on the overall impact of this work and the potential advances in the field of brain health?
5. Does it relay how the proposal supports the missions of the Heart Association and the AAN in their commitment to advance and promote brain health for all?

Criterion 2 – Evaluation of the Applicant – 30%

1. Does the applicant have the potential for a research career in brain health?
2. Are the applicant's career plans specified in the application?
3. Is this supported by the applicant's academic record and the assessment provided by the three letters of reference?
4. Does the applicant have prior research experience and/or publications?
5. Is there a clear rationale supporting the need for the proposed training?
6. What is the mentor's assessment of the applicant?

Criterion 3 – Mentor/Training Plan and Environment – 35%

Because the fellow receives only a stipend from the award, additional monetary support for the proposed work **MUST** come from the mentor's laboratory. Therefore, the proposal will likely be related to the mentor's currently funded work. The mentor should clarify the role the applicant played in developing the proposal, the relationship of the proposal to ongoing work in the mentor's laboratory, and how the proposal will contribute toward the training and career development of the applicant.

Mentor (Sponsor) and Training Plan

1. Is the mentor an independent investigator?
2. Does the mentor have the experience to direct the proposed training, as evidenced by a track record regarding productivity, funding and prior trainees?
3. Does the mentor have the appropriate expertise to support the trainee's career in the rapidly evolving field of brain health?
4. Does the mentor have adequate current funding to support the applicant's project?
5. Does the mentor demonstrate familiarity with the applicant's career and developmental goals and provide a comprehensive plan that supports the

applicant's career goals, which should be outlined in the Personal Statement section of the applicant's biosketch?

6. Is there a plan for instruction in the responsible conduct of research, considering the specific characteristics of the training program, the level of trainee experience, and the particular circumstances of the trainees? The reviewers will evaluate the adequacy of the proposed training in relation to the following: A sufficiently broad selection of subject matter, such as conflict of interest, authorship, data management, human subjects and animal use, laboratory safety, research misconduct, research ethics. The submission of the NIH RCR form is not required.

Environment

Does the scientific environment in which the work will be done contribute to the probability of a successful learning experience? Is there evidence of institutional commitment?

Criterion 4 - Evaluation of the Proposal - 30%

The trainee and mentor should collaboratively provide a thoughtfully planned, systematic proposal aimed at clearly answering an investigative question in brain health research. (5-page limit, not including citations to the literature)

Note: The proposal will be assessed on scientific merit, but equally as an integral part of the applicant's development into a career aligned with the Heart Association's and AAN's missions.

A new fellow may not have had adequate time to generate preliminary data; therefore, applicants may present preliminary data generated by the mentor. The assessment of preliminary data, whether generated by the mentor or the applicant, should be put into perspective so that bold new ideas and risk-taking by beginning investigators are encouraged rather than stymied.

1. Is the Proposed Work:

- Appropriate for the applicant, given his/her academic background, experience and career interests?
- Does the proposal contain the right balance of challenge, importance of the research question, and feasibility in relation to the applicant's experience and training?
- Does the proposed work have the potential to advance knowledge in the field of brain health?

2. Does the Proposed Project

- Include a specific hypothesis and describe the applicant's role in the proposal;
- Provide a concise account of the subject matter, an overview of each part of the proposal, specific aims and the methodology;
- For all applications that include vertebrate animals or human subjects, applicants must explain how relevant biological variables, such as sex, are factored into the research design, analysis and reporting. Furthermore, strong justification from the scientific literature, preliminary data, or other relevant considerations, must be provided for applications proposing to study only one sex.

3. Significance

- Does this study address an important problem that is a barrier to attaining and maintaining brain health for all? Does the proposal address a specific gap in knowledge?
- Does the science accelerate the discovery, interpretation and application of scientific knowledge to enhance and advance brain health?