



## Research Innovation and Development Grants in Economics (RIDGE)

### [RIDGE Partnership](#)

#### 2024 Request for Proposals

#### IMPORTANT DATES

Informational webinar for applicants (optional):	December 4, 2023 (1pm eastern)
Letter of intent (optional):	December 15, 2023
Proposals due:	January 31, 2024
Awards announcement:	Anticipated March 29, 2024
Funding period (up to 18 months):	June 1, 2024 – November 30, 2025
Interim workshop:	Anticipated January 24, 2025
Final conference for this RIDGE round:	October 2025

#### OBJECTIVE

The [RIDGE Partnership](#) supports innovative research on food and nutrition assistance programs and aims to broaden the network of researchers applying their expertise to USDA topics. This extramural grants program seeks applications from a diverse community of experienced food and nutrition assistance researchers, early career scholars, and established researchers who bring expertise in another field of study.

#### OVERVIEW

Federal food and nutrition assistance programs are central to improving food and nutrition security among economically vulnerable people in the United States. The programs reach millions of families by helping put food on the table and by setting nutrition standards for meals in schools and child care settings. Given the scope and reach of these programs, the U.S. Department of Agriculture invests in food and nutrition assistance research to understand the

determinants of program participation, program impact and administration, and the potential for innovations to improve program effectiveness and integrity. This diverse portfolio has long included several mechanisms to fund research on federal food and nutrition assistance, such as:

- 1) Large-scale extramural contracts from the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) and grants through the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). For example, the School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study, funded by FNS, examined both the nutritional quality of school meals after implementation of updated nutrition standards and the cost of producing those meals.
- 2) Intramural USDA research, such as the 2021 update from FNS to the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) that motivated the largest increase in SNAP benefit levels in decades; similarly, annual food security reports from the USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) play a major role in national discussions of hunger prevention.
- 3) Smaller-scale extramural research. For example, USDA's Research Innovation and Development Grants in Economics (RIDGE) has supported smaller research grants through programs administered with university partners around the country for 25 years.

Launched in 1998, housed in ERS, and funded jointly by ERS and FNS, RIDGE supports innovative projects in food and nutrition assistance research and nurtures a community of social science scholars working in this area. In September 2022, the new RIDGE partnership was awarded to Tufts University, University of Connecticut, and University of Missouri. The RIDGE Partnership offers research grants as well as insight into policy needs, data resources, and program applications.

### ***Background Resources***

A major goal of RIDGE is to support innovative and policy-relevant research that does not duplicate existing literature and ongoing research initiatives. Useful background material is provided on the RIDGE Partnership website ([ridge.nutrition.tufts.edu](https://ridge.nutrition.tufts.edu)), including:

- [Previous projects through RIDGE and a small grants program on food security](#)
- Internal and external research supported by USDA
- Links to program information and research literature
- Information about potential data sources

## **2024 RIDGE FUNDING PROGRAM**

### ***Program Areas***

All applications **must focus on food and nutrition assistance programs**. Proposals may address one or more programs. Collectively, the funded projects will include the three major program areas:

- (1) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP);
- (2) Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC);
- (3) Child nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), Summer Food Service Program, Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) for Children, and Afterschool Snack Program, and Summer Food Service Program.

Studies of smaller food and nutrition assistance programs, such as the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, the Seniors Farmers' market Nutrition Program, nutrition incentives programs (GusNIP and HIP), or the Special Milk Program may also be funded.

### ***Topic Areas***

Applicants are encouraged to propose studies that respond to research priorities and topics of interest to ERS and FNS. The RIDGE partnership supports a renewed focus on economic aspects of federal food and nutrition assistance programs. Examples of this aspect include, but are not limited to prices, financial incentives, costs, changes in benefits, and benefit redemption. The RIDGE partnership also supports broadening and diversifying the network of social scientists studying food and nutrition assistance programs. Several suggested topics are outlined in the areas of interest below following the pillars that defined the scope of the [White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health](#) held in September 2022 and [USDA priorities](#). The White House Conference Pillars that are considered in this RFP are the following: improve food access and affordability, integrate nutrition and health, empower all consumers to make and have access to healthy choices, and enhance nutrition and food security research. Additionally, the key USDA priorities that are relevant for this call for proposals include: reduce barriers to USDA programs, direct USDA programs to those who need them most, and expand equitable access to USDA food and nutrition assistance programs. These two documents helped us delineate timely and policy relevant topics. Additional topics and extensions of these areas are also welcome.

#### **I. Program Participation Effects**

USDA is interested in innovative policy-relevant research on the effects of participation in SNAP, WIC, child nutrition programs, and other USDA food and nutrition assistance programs. This includes, but is not limited to, the effects of program participation on food choices, diet quality and intake, body mass index, academic outcomes, household food security, and physical and mental health.

- Study the effects of variation across or within states in SNAP eligibility and benefit rules, nutrition education, access to authorized retailers, or financial incentives such as Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP).
- Assess the effects of changes in eligibility rules, verification, community eligibility or universal free eligibility, or nutrition standards for meals provided through NSLP and SBP on children's dietary, health, and/or academic outcomes, and parent and student satisfaction.
- Study participation in the new Summer EBT program, including whether there is variation among states.
- Investigate the impact of possible WIC food package changes, such as increases in dollar amount of WIC fruit and vegetables vouchers; breastfeeding promotion efforts, infant formula shortages, or other policy variations, on a variety of outcomes, including maternal health and mortality.
- Assess the heterogeneity of program participation or dosage on health outcomes by race, ethnicity, disability, rurality, or regions.

## **II. Determinants of Program Participation**

USDA is interested in research on determinants of participation in SNAP, WIC, and child nutrition programs. Examples of possible questions follow, but applicants are encouraged to consider alternative questions related to explaining household or provider decisions to participate in these food and nutrition assistance programs.

- Investigate effects of multiple program participation on household food security, spending choices, food choices, and diet quality.
- For food and nutrition assistance programs, investigate the presence or effects of a “benefits cliff” or sharp reduction in benefits as a function of rising income.
- Examine whether and how stringent eligibility requirements in food and nutrition assistance programs affect participation.
- Assess changes in program participation with the termination of COVID-19 emergency support and other temporary funding that were received during COVID-19 pandemic.
- Evaluate the role of macroeconomic factors and household-level income shocks in affecting participation in food and nutrition assistance programs.

## **III. Equitable Access to USDA Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs**

Building on the [White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health](#) held in September 2022, we seek research projects that examine equitable access to USDA food and nutrition assistance programs and reduction of barriers to program access. Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Study access to summer meals in rural areas with the new noncongregate meal service option.
- Study the effects of SNAP demonstration pilot projects on reducing barriers and increasing access to SNAP among tribal nations.
- Study whether online purchasing and mobile payments using SNAP benefits have increased access for certain population groups.
- Assess the effects of WIC modernization (e.g. enrolling and keeping enrolled all eligible families, improving the shopping experience, continuation of remote benefit delivery option) on WIC retention, utilization of WIC benefits, and food and nutrition outcomes for mothers and children.
- Investigate how efforts to improve access to SNAP for formerly incarcerated individuals vary by state in terms of providing waivers, hosting webinars, connecting SNAP agencies with correction facilities, as well as number of enrollees.
- Assess how USDA’s efforts to translate website and public-facing nutrition programs materials into different language has reduced barriers to participation.
- Assess the effects of SNAP Electronic Healthy Incentive Project (eHIP) on consumption of fruits and vegetables, improvements in balanced diet, and child’s obesity.

### ***Types of Studies***

Proposals could include any of the following types of studies: evaluations of promising interventions or natural experiments; small-scale experimental or quasi-experimental studies; small surveys and other primary data collection activities; retrospective analyses of national, state or local food policy changes; modeling studies, and cost-effectiveness analyses; or studies that combine strong quantitative analysis with qualitative methods. For primary data collection studies, researchers are required to include a discussion of human subjects and institutional review board (IRB) issues. We recognize that large-scale surveys may be infeasible given the funding limits for RIDGE grants; secondary data analyses and qualitative research are welcome. The USDA/ERS Consumer Food Data System includes several new data resources, of which some are provided in public use files and others have restricted use and must be analyzed in a secure data center. Applicants should not propose data sources where future approval for data access may be delayed or denied; such data sources may affect reviews of probability of success under the rating criterion for overall approach described below.

Proposed studies may be conducted as extensions or supplements to existing studies if they address the RIDGE research priorities and offer innovative ideas. It is important that applicants disclose any other current or potential funding sources with overlapping aims and specifically explain the additional gain from the requested RIDGE funds.

For all types of studies, proposals must include specific plans for communicating and disseminating research results to a variety of diverse audiences, including policymakers, advocates, researchers, and relevant stakeholders.

### ***Types of Grant Awards***

A total of approximately \$350,000 will be awarded under this RFP for two award types.

#### ***1) Standard Research Grants***

These awards are intended for research projects by investigators with a faculty (or comparable research) appointment in an institution of higher education or non-profit research organizations. Each standard research grant will be awarded up to **\$75,000**, inclusive of indirect costs. Proposals will be evaluated based on the value of the research in the manuscript proposed as a result of this grant program. Pilot studies in preparation for potential future grant proposals to bigger organizations such as NSF, NIH or others, are welcomed, but the proposal still will be evaluated based on the proposed deliverable for the RIDGE grant. When appropriate, based on a proposed project of smaller scope, applicants may propose budgets lower than the maximum.

#### ***2) Dissertation and Post-doctoral Fellowship Grants***

These awards provide dissertation support to eligible pre-doctoral candidates or research support of eligible post-doctoral researchers/fellows. Each grant will award up to **\$25,000**, inclusive of indirect costs.

All award totals are offered for a maximum funding period of **18 months** and must include funds for required travel (see Terms of Awards).

## ***Eligibility***

### *For All Award Types*

- Applicant organizations must be accredited private or public institutions of higher education or non-profit research organizations. The applicant organization's sponsored research office must have approved the proposal and budget prior to submission.
- Applicant organizations must be based in the United States or its territories.
- Investigators must have completed appropriate education for the proposed research.
- The applicant (principal investigator) may not be an employee of the UConn Rudd Center, the Friedman School at Tufts University, or the School of Government and Public Affairs at University of Missouri.

For all awards, the proposal must discuss methods and a realistic schedule for ensuring project completion in the event of graduation or position change.

### *For Post-Doctoral and Dissertation Award Types*

Per Federal Government funding regulations, only U.S. citizens, permanent residents and equivalent categories will be eligible to apply for dissertation and post-doctoral awards. Applicants must identify a mentor or research or dissertation advisor on the proposed project and provide evidence of their commitment to the project (e.g., letter of support, budget) and a mentor's biosketch. An applicant for a post-doctoral award must hold a doctorate or terminal degree (e.g., PhD, MD, JD) at the time of the application in January 2024. An applicant for a dissertation award must have advanced to doctoral candidacy (as determined by the applicant's institution) at the time of the application in January 2024.

### *Diversity and Inclusion Commitment*

The RIDGE Partnership is committed to promoting diversity and inclusion in food and nutrition assistance research. It reflects a key RIDGE priority to build a network of researchers whose work benefits all participants in the USDA programs. The RIDGE Partnership encourages applications from investigators of every race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, age, and disability status. RIDGE highly values diversity in perspectives, regions of the country, life experiences, and backgrounds that can help expand our understanding of challenges faced by program participants and find innovative solutions to address them.

## **HOW TO APPLY**

### **a) Letter of Intent to Submit a Proposal**

If you plan to submit a proposal, we request a letter of intent to be submitted via email by December 15, 2023. The letter should only contain the names and contact information of any PI and co-PIs, the intended title and topic area of the planned project, whether the proposal is for a standard research grant, or a dissertation or postdoctoral fellow research grant, and the name of the university or organization that will serve as the point of contact for award administration.

This letter is not mandatory and will be only used for planning purposes for proposal reviews. Please email your letter of intent to the RIDGE coordinator at [ridge@tufts.edu](mailto:ridge@tufts.edu).

## **b) Submission of Full Proposals**

All applications in response to this RFP must be submitted online using the RIDGE Partnership online system. Visit <http://ridge.nutrition.tufts.edu> and choose “*Information for 2024 Applicants.*”

The online application system provides templates and detailed instructions for each component of the grant application. Applicants must follow the instructions and use the templates provided. We strongly recommend that applicants log in to the system and understand online submission requirements before the submission deadline. In fairness to all applicants, late proposals will not be accepted.

For all types of awards, a complete application includes the following:

- (1) a full proposal using a required narrative template provided (up to 10 pages)
- (2) a budget using an Excel template provided
- (3) a detailed budget justification using a template provided
- (4) a biosketch for key members of the research team, including a principal investigator (see instructions in the template provided)
- (5) supporting documents, e.g., letters of support (required for post-doctoral and dissertation applications; optional for other researchers).

Format: Please utilize standard letter-size paper (8-1/2” x 11”), margins no less than 1 inch, 1.5 line spacing, and 12-point Times New Roman font. Number each page of an attachment sequentially.

### ***Terms of Awards***

1. Awards will be made directly to the principal investigator’s institution. Budget amounts include indirect costs at the applicant’s institution, if required. Statutory Authority 7 U.S.C. 3310 limits indirect costs to **28.2%** of direct costs or 22% of the total funds requested. We encourage lower rates, if possible. Proposals with budgets exceeding the funding maximum, inclusive of indirect costs, will not be accepted.
2. Grantees are expected to attend a virtual **Interim Workshop** in January 2025 to discuss their early research results. Workshop attendees are asked to prepare an early draft paper and submit it to the RIDGE coordinator ([ridge@tufts.edu](mailto:ridge@tufts.edu)) at least 10 days prior to the workshop. The interim paper is not required to be a complete version of the final paper.
3. Budget amounts must include expenses incurred for required participation in October 2025 **RIDGE Outcomes Conference** (location to be determined, Washington, DC or Kansas City, MO). Grantees should include travel expenses as part of the grant budget.

Grantees should submit a draft paper to the RIDGE Coordinator ([ridge@tufts.edu](mailto:ridge@tufts.edu)) at least 10 days prior to the conference.

4. Grantees are required to furnish the RIDGE Partnership with quarterly progress reports with an invoice for payment. The award agreement with the grantee's institution will stipulate a percentage of the total award that should be invoiced no earlier than submission of the deliverables in #3 and #4.
5. The revised final report, executive summary, and video brief are due no later than November 30, 2025. The final report will consist of the paper from the fall RIDGE Outcomes Conference, revised to respond to comments. The executive summary must follow a format provided by the RIDGE Partnership. These deliverables should be submitted to [ridge@tufts.edu](mailto:ridge@tufts.edu).

## **REVIEW PROCESS**

Full proposals will be reviewed by external referees and internal program staff using the following criteria.

### *Research Merit of the Proposal (35 points)*

Is the proposal innovative? Are the research aims and hypotheses adequate? Are the objectives clear? Does the proposal respond to USDA and RIDGE research priorities, as outlined in the RFP? Is the study relevant for understanding the economics of food and nutrition assistance programs? Will the project advance policy knowledge and support program implementation? Is the study population well-justified (either nationally representative or a population experiencing high levels of unmet need or food insecurity)?

### *Overall Approach (30 points)*

Is the research design strong and rigorous? Are the data appropriate? Is timely data access assured? Is the analysis plan clear? Are the statistical methods correct? Do the methods avoid unnecessary complexity? Is the project feasible and realistic? Will the project be completed as planned? If relevant, is a power calculation provided? Are limitations acknowledged?

### *Workplan, Budget, Dissemination and Cost-Effectiveness (20 points)*

Does the budget adequately support the project? Is the budget cost-effective? Is there justification for any large or unusual expenditures? Is the workplan reasonable and sufficient to ensure timely implementation and completion? Are personnel, facilities, and instrumentation available? When achievement of the workplan requires collaboration, are participating partners committed? If appropriate, is there a reasonable plan for communication and dissemination? Will the team share the data into a repository? Sharing of data is highly recommended to facilitate replicability and the translation and dissemination of research results.



### *Key Personnel (15 points)*

Are the key personnel qualified? Are they available and committed for the work time budgeted? Does the proposal bring investigators that are new to the RIDGE Partnership? Does it bring qualified investigators that are new to food and nutrition assistance research? Does the proposal connect investigators with new or underrepresented skills or backgrounds with the field of food and nutrition assistance research?

### **Resources**

Please visit the RIDGE Partnership website at <http://ridge.nutrition.tufts.edu> for useful background information, updates, and frequently asked questions (FAQs).

### **Questions**

Responsible staff members at the RIDGE Partnership are:

- Parke Wilde, *Director*
- Tatiana Andreyeva, *Associate Director*
- Irma Arteaga, *Associate Director*
- Lorenzo Lopes, *RIDGE Coordinator*
- Kim Wright, *Senior Research Administrator*

Please direct all questions to the RIDGE Coordinator ([ridge@tufts.edu](mailto:ridge@tufts.edu)).