



GERALD J. AND DOROTHY R.
Friedman School of
Nutrition Science and Policy



Research Innovation and Development Grants in Economics (RIDGE)

[RIDGE Partnership](#)

Request for Proposals

IMPORTANT DATES

Request for proposals release:	December 1, 2022
Informational webinar for applicants:	December 9, 2022 & January 9, 2023
Proposals due:	January 30, 2023
Awards announcement:	March 20, 2023 (planned)
Funding period (up to 18 months):	June 1, 2023 – November 30, 2024
Interim workshop:	January 29, 2024 (planned)
Final research paper presentation:	October 7, 2024 (planned)

OBJECTIVE

The [RIDGE Partnership](#) supports innovative research on 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 nutrition assistance researchers, early career scholars, and established researchers who bring expertise in another research area.

OVERVIEW

Federal 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 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 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 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 recent 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 for more than 20 years supported smaller research grants through programs administered with university partners around the country.

Launched in 1998, the RIDGE program, housed in ERS and funded jointly by ERS and FNS to support innovative projects in nutrition assistance research and develop a community of social science scholars working in this area. In 2016-2021, the RIDGE program was administered by a collaboration between the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University and the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut. In September 2022, the new RIDGE partnership was awarded to Tufts University, University of Connecticut, and University of Missouri, which will offer initiatives to enhance visibility and relevance of the RIDGE-funded projects and promote research on nutrition assistance programs by scholars from diverse settings. 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 funding priorities 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), including:

- [Previous RIDGE funded projects](#)
- Internal and external research supported by USDA
- Links to program information and research literature
- An annotated list of potential data sources

2023 RIDGE FUNDING PROGRAM

Program Areas

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

- (1) 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;

- (2) Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC);
- (3) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Studies of smaller nutrition assistance programs (such as the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, or the Seniors Farmers' market Nutrition 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 has a special focus on the economics of federal nutrition assistance programs. Applicants from disciplines other than economics are welcomed, and the proposed methods can come from any discipline; the relevance for understanding the economics of federal nutrition assistance programs will be one of the rating criteria discussed below. Several suggested topics are outlined in the areas of interest below. 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, and the child nutrition 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.

- Assess 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 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 academic outcomes, and parent and student satisfaction.
- Assess the dietary, health and cost implications of the revisions to the CACFP meal patterns. Additional outcomes of interest include the impact on CACFP participation, food security and variation in outcomes across states.
- Assess the impact of possible WIC food package changes, breastfeeding promotion efforts, infant formula shortages, or other policy variations, on a variety of outcomes, including maternal health and mortality.

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 and provider decisions to participate in these nutrition assistance programs.

- For SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs, investigate the presence or effects of a "benefits cliff" or sharp reduction in benefits as a function of rising income.
- Examine factors that influence participation in WIC as well as the retention of children after their first birthday.

- Analyze the determinants of cross-state variation in CACFP participation and implications for low-income families, child care providers and the state economy.
- Assess changes in program participation with the expansion of public assistance programs during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Evaluate the role of macroeconomic factors and household-level income shocks in affecting participation in nutrition assistance programs.

III. Using Novel Data Sources to Improve Evaluation Research

To understand and enhance the effectiveness of nutrition assistance programs, we seek research projects that improve the breadth of data sources for evaluation research. Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Effectively use data from the USDA/ERS Consumer Food Data System; SNAP Quality Control data; SNAP-Ed data; school-district data on school meal participation and food purchases; WIC State food instrument issuance or redemption data; WIC EBT data; birth certificate data with WIC and Medicaid participation information; or point-of-sale scanner data.
- Illuminate the best ways of combining survey data methods (which have been struggling with low response rates and other challenges) and administrative data methods (which face challenges related to informed consent and data confidentiality).
- Provide a cost-benefit analysis of alternative policy choices to improve customer service (e.g., reducing client burden), targeting (e.g., working poor), and program integrity.
- Assess the effect of SNAP eligibility rules and program operations on household decisions and choices regarding employment, marriage, childbearing, asset purchases, or savings.

IV. Nutrition Assistance as an Economic Safety Net

The RIDGE Program solicits applications to understand the economics of client decisions (including program participation and food choices) and program management (including program costs and efficient operation). Examples of research questions of interest include:

- Investigate effects of multiple program participation on household food security, spending choices, food choices, and diet quality.
- Determine what share of households participate in multiple nutrition assistance programs versus only one or none of the programs for which they are eligible, what factors influence these participation decisions, and how the programs work individually and collectively to create a safety net.
- Assess how benefits from multiple public assistance programs, including child care assistance, tax credits, unemployment insurance, and energy assistance, are combined to affect food security, food choices and diet quality and other relevant outcomes.
- Explore how nutrition assistance programs affect the level and stability of spending patterns of different types of households (such as elderly households, households with and without children, single-adult households, and households with and without earnings).
- Analyze the dynamics of food insecurity among various nutrition assistance population subgroups. Assess food security measurement methods suitable for understanding nutrition assistance program effects.

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. 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 welcomed. 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 \$450,000 will be awarded under this RFP for the three 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.

2) Smaller Research Grants

These awards are intended for research support of smaller pilot studies with a total budget of up to **\$50,000**, inclusive of indirect costs.

3) 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 Rudd Center at UConn, 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 2023. 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 2023.

Diversity and Inclusion Commitment

The RIDGE Partnership is committed to promoting diversity and inclusion in 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, region 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

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 2023 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, and at least 12-point 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 2024 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) 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 2024 **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) 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, 2024. 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.

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 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, 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?

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 nutrition assistance research? Does the proposal connect investigators with new or underrepresented skills or backgrounds with the field of nutrition assistance research?

Resources

Please visit the RIDGE Partnership website at <http://ridge.nutrition.tufts.edu> for useful background information and updates.

Questions

Responsible staff members at the RIDGE Partnership are:

- Parke Wilde, *Director*
- Tatiana Andreyeva, *Associate Director*

- Irma Arteaga, *Associate Director*
- Sarah Bermingham, *Administrative Coordinator*
- Kim Wright, *Senior Research Administrator*

Please direct all questions to the RIDGE Coordinator (ridge@tufts.edu).