

THE HELEN HAY WHITNEY FOUNDATION

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**Online Application Deadline:
5:00pm EST, Monday, June 15, 2026**

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

ELIGIBILITY

Q. Q. The Foundation accepts applications from candidates who have been working in their postdoctoral laboratory for no more than one year at the time of the deadline for submitting the application and who have received a PhD (or D.Phil. or equivalent) degree no more than two years before the deadline, or an M.D. degree no more than four years before the deadline. How are the dates of the Ph.D. and M.D. defined? What constitutes postdoctoral research experience?

A. We consider the day you defend your thesis as the date of your Ph.D. The date of an M.D. is the date of the formal awarding of the degree.

The one-year limit for work in the postdoctoral laboratory and two year limit for the interval between thesis defense and application deadline allows time to finish work in the thesis laboratory and to submit and revise papers.

Clinical residencies, military service, parental leaves of absence, etc., are of course not considered postdoctoral research experience.

The Foundation will, at its discretion, accept applications from candidates whose postdoctoral research has extended for a month or two longer than the two-year limit, but in no case will a substantially longer interval be approved.

Q. Am I eligible to apply for the fellowship before I obtain my degree, as I will probably not be able to defend my thesis before the application deadline?

A. You may apply before obtaining your degree, as long as you will receive your degree before you intend to start your postdoctoral research under a Whitney Fellowship grant.

Q. I applied last year and was not awarded a Whitney Fellowship. May I reapply a second time for next year's deadline?

A. You may apply a second time as long as you don't have more than one year of post-doctoral experience by the application deadline. Please note that every year a revised version of the online application form is created. If you will indeed reapply, make sure that you use the new one. In any case, you must reapply as if you never applied before, and you cannot simply reactivate your old application. A word of caution: we get outstanding applications every year. Unless you believe that your credentials have changed substantially during the past year, reapplication may not be worth the effort.

Q. I am interested in applying for the HHWF fellowship, and am wondering if it can be used at a federal government research institution, e.g. The National Institutes of Health?

A. Yes, you may pursue your proposed research at such an institution. Normally, when we deal with a non-governmental institution, we issue semi-annual stipends directly to the university or research institute in question. With the NIH, however, we pay you directly on a quarterly basis and send you a Federal Form-1099 at the end of the year. The research allowance is paid directly to the NIH.

Q. The Foundation expects that fellowship training be obtained in an academic setting, as opposed to a commercial or an industrial lab. How does the Foundation view a non-profit research institute?

A. Non-profit research institutes, whether supported privately or publicly, are appropriate places for HHWF postdoctoral training.

Q. I intend to pursue my postdoctoral research in a laboratory that already has a Whitney Fellow. Will this hurt my chances of getting a fellowship? I understand that your Foundation does award up to two Whitney Fellows in the same lab.

A. The presence of one Whitney Fellow in the laboratory of your prospective sponsor will not adversely affect your application.

Q. After obtaining my Ph.D., I worked at a biotech company. Does my time spent working in biotech count as post-doctoral experience?

A. Your work at the biotech company counts as part of the two-year maximum between thesis defense and this year's application deadline.

Q. I am a second-year cardiology fellow interested in continuing my basic research. Because of my residency and fellowship training, I passed the four-year cutoff after medical school. Do you make exceptions for MD/PhD-graduates?

A. When an applicant obtains both an M.D. and a Ph.D., we go by the most recently obtained degree. Therefore, if you defended your thesis less than 2 years or obtained your M.D. less than 4 years before the application deadline and if you do not have more than one year of postdoctoral research experience by the application deadline, then you are eligible to apply.

INVENTION POLICY

Q. Does the Foundation have an invention/patent policy?

A. The Foundation does not maintain an invention/patent policy. Our only stipulation is that you cite the HHWF in any of your publications or discoveries resulting from your Whitney Fellowship. Your host institution will have an invention policy, however, which probably applies to you.

DURATION OF FELLOWSHIP

Q. I understand that the fellowship is a three-year commitment. Is it possible to start the fellowship in one laboratory and then finish in another?

A. The three-year commitment is for one laboratory only. If during the fellowship your mentor moves or some other unusual circumstance arises, you may request a transfer to another laboratory, subject to review and approval by the SAC Chairman.

CHANGE DURING FELLOWSHIP (i.e. Lab Transfer)

Q. I am wondering what happens to the fellowship if I change my supervisor or laboratory mid-fellowship (either within the same institution or transfer to a different one)?

A. When we evaluate your application, among the many factors we take into consideration is the proposed supervisor and the suitability of their laboratory for the goals of the fellowship. We do, however, consider mid-fellowship requests to transfer to another laboratory or to another institution. The Chair of the SAC will evaluate the request and in general require an outline of the project proposed in the new laboratory, a letter from the new sponsor, and when appropriate, a short note of approval from the current sponsor. In most cases we have faced in the past (e.g., supervisor moves to another institution or to industry; fellow needs to move because of a spousal move; fellow and current supervisor agree that another laboratory would be more appropriate for the fellow's goals), approval has been straightforward.

STIPEND & EXPENSE ALLOWANCE

Q. I read that no part of the research allowance can be used for overhead. Is this also true for the actual stipend?

A. Yes, our policy of 'no overhead' extends to the fellowship stipend, as well.

Q. What is your policy regarding computers purchased with the annual research allowance – do they belong to the fellow or the institution?

A. Portable equipment purchased with the research allowance, such as laptops, may be kept by the fellow after they finish their fellowship. Fixed lab equipment will stay in the lab.

APPLICATION

Q. In the application you request reference letters 'from three of your former professors or supervisors'. I did not work with Dr. _____, but he knows my work through collaborations. Would that be accepted?

A. As long as the referee is closely familiar with you and your work, it is acceptable.

Q. Regarding the 5 page research proposal, I am attempting to balance the importance of background material and discussion of relevance, versus experimental detail. What are your guidelines?

A. There are no rigid guidelines beyond what is in our instructions. You should choose a balance appropriate for your project, assuming that the application will be read by an expert in your field, broadly defined (such as neuroscience, structural biology or developmental biology), but not necessarily by someone who knows the detailed topic of your research.

Q. The instructions state, "Do not include your prospective supervisor as a reference". My prospective supervisor knows me unusually well, however, as a result of previous collaboration. I think it would be unfortunate not to have him or her recommend my candidacy.

A. Your prospective supervisor may include in their sponsor's letter anything he or she wishes to comment about you and your work, but because of the potential for conflict of interest, we focus more on the evaluation of the other 4 references. We still require 4 other reference letters, one of which should be from your thesis advisor.

Q. Is it permissible to have two co-supervisors for the Fellowship? My work is interdisciplinary, and my potential supervisors have different but equally relevant areas of expertise. They also have an ongoing collaborative relationship.

A. It is permissible to have two co-supervisors. Enter both names. When entering their information in the applicable sections, select 'Prospective Supervisor' (primary) or 'Secondary Supervisor' to assign their Roles in the drop down menu.

Q. After I applied for the Whitney Fellowship, I was informed that a paper I cited in my bibliography was accepted for publication. May I submit it to the Foundation?

A. You can email it to us at office@hhwf.org, and we will update your application.

FOREIGN STUDENTS

Q. I am currently applying for a Whitney Fellowship. At this point I do not have a visa for my intended stay in the U.S. Do I need the appropriate visa before applying for the HHWF, or does it suffice to apply for a visa in time for my intended starting date?

A. Foreign Students will need to obtain appropriate visa documentation, as required by US Immigration. It is sufficient to simply state in your application your intent to obtain the appropriate visa documentation in time for your intended fellowship activation date. Include this statement as a separate letter in your application. When uploading this letter, select “Miscellaneous Letter” from the drop-down menu, to assign this attachment.

Q. What is your policy regarding student visas for foreign students?

A. The Foundation does not specify which visa a fellow must obtain. Our only stipulation is that you comply with whatever the US Immigration laws and your prospective institution require.

Q. The application form asks me for a social security number. Since I am currently not a US citizen and do not have one, what should write in that field?

A. It is sufficient to enter "NA" for 'Not Applicable'.

HHMI – JANELIA RESEARCH CAMPUS CANDIDATES

Q. I plan to pursue my postdoctoral fellowship at the Janelia Research Campus. I would like to apply for the Whitney fellowship because of the opportunities that it would give me to meet other scientists at similar stages as mine. The Janelia Research Campus’ policy prevents me from receiving any external funds, however, and I would have to decline the stipend part of the fellowship even if a fellowship is awarded. Will my application be given full consideration?

A. Yes, we do accept applications from candidates pursuing their research at the Janelia Research Campus. Your application would be given the same consideration as any other. In the event of an award of a Whitney Fellowship, your stipend salary would be paid directly by HHMI. In every other respect, you would be considered as any other Whitney Fellow, including participation in our Annual Fellow’s Meetings.