

DECEMBER 2025 – REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS

- **2026 Graduate Student Scholars Program**

Program Description

The Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant (IISG) Scholars programs provide professional networking and development opportunities for faculty and graduate students from institutes of higher learning in Illinois and Indiana who wish to develop extension, education, or communication capacities related to their scholarly interests.

One of IISG's long-term goals is to help build a community of researchers and outreach professionals focused on critically important Lake Michigan issues. The IISG Scholars programs are designed to help build this community by introducing researchers to the issues and the people, organizations, and communities that are affected by them. In addition, the programs are intended to help graduate student scholars further the impact of their research, and faculty scholars develop innovative, fundable proposals for future work in the region. Past scholar projects can be viewed at <https://iiseagrant.org/category/iisg-scholars/>.

For this Request for Applications (RFA), we are funding the **IISG Graduate Student Scholars Program only**. In 2026, IISG expects to support 4–10 graduate student scholars, depending on available funds. Awards are issued for one year and activities should be completed during that year. Projects are anticipated to start June 1, 2026 and end May 31, 2027.

The IISG Faculty Scholars Program remains on hiatus for 2026, but faculty with research ideas that could benefit the IISG mission are encouraged to contact IISG to discuss them.

Work proposed as part of this award should further the [IISG focus](#) to empower southern Lake Michigan communities to secure a healthy environment and economy. Applicants are encouraged to review the [IISG 2024–2027 Strategic Plan](#) as they develop their materials. It may be acceptable to adapt research methods or results from other locations to the southern Lake Michigan region. For example, a research project conducted in southern Indiana could be expanded to include northwest Indiana and/or northeast Illinois; methods developed in another region could be applied to southern Lake Michigan and surrounding communities.

IISG encourages students from all disciplines to apply. IISG specifically encourages applicants whose proposed project outcomes have the potential to benefit communities that historically have not had access to the most up-to-date scientific information. Questions should primarily be directed to IISG Director Stuart Carlton (carltons@purdue.edu). Templates and recordings that outline the technical aspects of applications, e.g., budget and forms preparation, are available

at <https://iiseagrant.org/research/funding-opportunities/templates-and-guidance-for-proposal-submissions/>.

Application Deadline

Applicants should submit materials via <https://esq.iiseagrant.org/> by **April 9, 2026, 11:59 p.m. Central Time**. Applications should be submitted to the "IL-IN SG 2026 Scholars Competition." Late applications will not be accepted unless the applicant has contacted IISG **before** the deadline to make sure appropriate staff members are aware of potential issues, (e.g., computer, power, or internet problems). IISG reserves the right to refuse late applications if the program determines that individual circumstances do not warrant an extension. IISG staff members will only be available to answer questions until 5:00 p.m. CT on April 9, 2026.

Review Panel

Applications will be reviewed by an external panel according to criteria listed below. The panel will be comprised of applied research, extension, and communication personnel, plus professionals who are involved in the PIs' topic areas of interest (e.g., natural resources agency personnel, community planners) and/or past IISG graduate student scholars. Some panelists may reside or work in Illinois or Indiana, i.e., not all panelists will be from out of state. All panelists must declare that they have no conflicts of interest with any application that they are reviewing.

Panelists will evaluate the applicants' suitability for program admission and provide a ranked order for the graduate student scholars. IISG administration will attempt to maximize the number of applications funded, taking into consideration requests on the part of applicants whose proposals are deemed "fundable" and the funds available for the competition. For graduate student scholars, the IISG administration will fund applications in ranked order with one exception: if deemed appropriate by the panel, IISG administration will spread funds across applicants from different institutions.

Expected Program Timeline*

- April 9, 2026: Applications due to IISG.
- April–May 2026: Review of applications and notification of graduate student and faculty scholars.
- June 1, 2026: Award initiation date.
- June 2026–May 2027: Participation in professional development activities for graduate student scholars.
- May 2027: Graduate students and faculty have presented project results to IISG and key partners.

Applications, Program Participation, and the Review Process

Award Amounts and Eligibility

Graduate student applicants can request up to \$10,000 to support research expenses, graduate student stipends, travel, or other activities that help expand

the scholarly or societal impact of their research. **Matching funds are not required for graduate student applicants; however, indirect costs can be charged.**

The applicant must be enrolled as a graduate student at an institute of higher learning in Illinois or Indiana at some point during the 2026–27 academic year. An applicant must have someone in their home department who is eligible and willing to serve as administrative lead on the project. It is preferable for administrative leads to not be Sea Grant staff members, although if this is not possible, a Sea Grant staff member can serve as administrative lead and the applicant is eligible for funding. Please contact Stuart Carlton (carltons@purdue.edu) with questions or concerns. Individuals who have received an IISG graduate student scholar grant in the past three years are not eligible for funding through this competition.

Expectations of Graduate Student Scholars

During their scholar year, graduate student scholars are expected to:

1. Participate in at least four professional development sessions, including Introduction to Sea Grant, Effective Communication via Social Media, Integrating Research and Extension, and Connecting Small Scale Research Projects to Broader Societal Impacts. Other offerings will vary among scholar cohorts but may include discussions about job opportunities outside of academia, books or journals, or grant writing. Activities will not be scheduled more than one per month and may be conducted virtually.
2. Present results to IISG and key parties, e.g., the external advisory committee and/or partner organizations, in early 2027 (exact date TBD). Presentations will likely occur in person in: Champaign-Urbana, Illinois; West Lafayette, Indiana; Chicago, Illinois; or northwest Indiana. The graduate student applicant should consider budgeting travel funds as part of the award to attend this event.

Failure to participate in required activities may lead to forfeiture of funds.

Application Materials

Templates and guidance for the following components can be found at:

<https://iiseagrant.org/research/funding-opportunities/templates-and-guidance-for-proposal-submissions/>. All applications must include components 1–7.

Submit only materials listed below. Directions in this document supersede directions on the template page.

1. **Front matter** (complete online form). Include the project title, names, affiliations, and physical and email addresses of both the applicant and the administrative lead, total budget request, and a brief description of the objectives, methodology, and rationale behind the proposed project. The project title should describe the work to be completed, i.e., more

than “2026 Scholars Application.”

2. **Statement of interest** (3-page maximum). Statements of interest should consist of two sections, outlined below. Applicants should include sufficient detail that reviewers can evaluate using criteria listed at the end of this guidance. However, applicants should keep in mind that not all reviewers are subject experts in their field of study. Statements of interest that contain jargon or specialized language can be difficult to evaluate. The sections to be included are:
 - a) A description of the activities that will be accomplished with award funds, including how these activities will allow the student to substantially improve their research and how these activities correspond to the IISG strategic plan. This section should include a brief rationale for the proposed work, descriptions of the research question(s) to be addressed, the study design, and how what is proposed differs from but is related to ongoing work (e.g., if the applicant is building on previous knowledge or partnerships; if there is a demonstrated need for the information to be generated through the proposed work).
 - b) A description of why the applicant is interested in the IISG Scholars Program and how the program fits into the applicant’s career goals. This section can take any format the applicant chooses.
3. **Letter of Commitment** (1 page). The intent of this opportunity is for the graduate student to be the driving force behind all project outcomes. However, funds will be sent to the graduate student’s institution rather than the student directly; thus, each applicant must identify an administrative lead for their project who can accept funds on their behalf. The student’s major professor may serve in this capacity, but this is not required, as long as someone is willing to serve as administrative lead. As noted above, it is preferable that Sea Grant staff members NOT serve as administrative leads, but this is allowed if there is no other option. A letter of commitment should come from the administrative lead and should confirm that the student is or will be enrolled at some point during the 2026–27 academic year and that the named person will support the student in their efforts. The letter of commitment is not a letter of recommendation, will not be evaluated, and will NOT be included in review materials. **Administrative leads should also ensure applicants adhere to application preparation policies of their home institution** (e.g., submitting through a pre-awards office of sponsored programs, including indirect costs in the budget).
4. **Budget requests** (90-4 form plus separate budget narrative). **Budgets must have institutional approval before submission. Applicants and administrative leads should ensure that budgets are fully executed by their home institution before being submitted.** Funding will be provided for up to one year beginning June 1, 2026, or the date of the award, and projects should be completed by May 31, 2027. Graduate student scholar

applicants can request up to \$10,000. Applicants should use the Excel version of the 90-4 form on the template page. The full list of budget categories can be found on the 90-4 form. Applicants can request graduate student stipends, research material costs, fringe, travel, printing, publication, documentation costs, etc. The graduate student's home institution federally negotiated indirect cost rate *can* be charged as part of this award. If an institution will not charge indirect costs, the applicant should submit documentation from fiscal personnel (e.g., an email or letter stating that indirect costs will not be charged). Budgets should include travel to mandatory activities described above if other travel funds are not available. Budget documents should list the administrative lead as the principal investigator and the student as co-investigator. Applicants may submit one extra page that outlines additional facilities, equipment, or other key components of the student's work that will help complete the project but have no funding request. This will be used for review purposes only.

5. **Applicant and Administrative Lead CVs** (2–3 pages each). NSF or NIH format is acceptable, but not required. The student applicant's CV will be included in review materials, but the administrative lead's CV will NOT be included in review materials.
6. **Data Management Plan** (max. 2 pages). Under NOAA directives, environmental data generated through projects funded by IISG must be verified and shared within two years of the project's completion. The full definition of environmental data can be found at <https://iiseagrant.org/research/principal-investigator-resources/>. If your project will not generate environmental data, state that in your application. If your project will generate environmental data, provide a plan for making the data accessible within 2 years of the completion of the project. Lack of an adequate data management plan may result in delayed distribution of funds.
7. **Abbreviated Environmental Compliance Questionnaire** (as many pages as needed). Download and complete the template. This is intended to be a standalone document that is independent of the proposal narrative and applicants should ensure that relevant details from the proposal narrative are included in the Abbreviated Environmental Compliance Questionnaire and vice versa. Every box should have an answer, and the questionnaire should cover all activities proposed. Provide copies of permits, IRB approval, and/or other forms, as appropriate.
8. **Purdue University Letter of Intent Form** (1 page). List the administrative lead as the principal investigator. This is not required for applicants from Purdue University and Purdue University Northwest.
9. **Purdue University Entity Profile** (1 page). This is not required for applicants from Purdue University and Purdue University Northwest.

Application Review for Graduate Student Scholars

The application materials will be reviewed by an external panel. The panel will use the criteria below to prepare for the discussion and through this discussion, will create a final ranking, (i.e., scores here will not directly influence the final ranked order):

Section 1: Based on the entire application package, please rate the following on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being best (25 marks total):

1. The proposed work is clearly described. Note that applicants need not have a history of work directly related to Lake Michigan to be considered.
2. Expenses listed in the proposed budget are appropriate and logical lines can be drawn between the requested support and completion of the graduate student's proposed work. The budget request need not encompass all anticipated charges, as it is expected that graduate students will be building on resources already available to them.
3. The applicant's previous academic and professional record is strong. It is appropriate to consider the stage of an applicant's career when providing this rating.
4. On the whole, materials submitted suggest that the applicant will be able to develop information and/or products that fit with [IISG's focus](#).
5. On the whole, materials submitted suggest that the applicant's research will be substantially improved via this award.

Section 2: Based on the entire application package, please provide an overall qualitative rating:

(A) Excellent – A truly meritorious project

(B) Good – A project that clearly deserves support but to which minor improvements are recommended to achieve desired outcomes

(C) Adequate – A project that should be supported, assuming major reservations related to achieving desired outcomes can be addressed

(D) Questionable – A project about which reservations are so serious that it should be supported only in exceptional circumstances

*Federal funding may sometimes be delayed. IISG will communicate anticipated changes in the program timeline as they arise.