Path to Innovation Pilot Program (PIPP)
Request for Applications

I. Opportunity Overview

The **Path to Innovation Pilot Program (PIPP)** is a North Carolina Central University (NCCU) initiative designed to prepare NCCU researchers for competitive funding from NCInnovation (NCI), a statewide initiative that provides grant funding to UNC System researchers to advance applied research from proof of concept toward commercialization.

Proposed technologies must be at a Technology Readiness Level (TRL) of 3 or higher to be eligible for an NCI grant. PIPP closes this gap by providing seed funding, hands-on technical and commercialization support, and direct engagement with North Carolina's innovation ecosystem—positioning NCCU faculty to enter NCI's eligibility stage with competitive, market-informed technologies at TRL 3 or higher.

Funding for this pilot is provided through resources committed by NCCU's Office of Research Compliance and Technology Transfer.

Not sure of your project's Technology Readiness Level (TRL)?

TRL is a 9-level scale used to assess a technology's maturity based on its stage of development, testing, and validation. Originally developed by NASA and now widely used across research and innovation sectors, TRLs indicate how far technology has progressed—from an early scientific concept to a proven solution ready for real-world application.

TRL	What Each TRL Looks Like in Research
1	**Basic Principles Observed and Reported.** You've identified/studied a scientific principle, phenomenon, or finding that could have practical significance, but you haven't developed or tested a specific application.
2	**Technology Concept Developed.** You can describe how the science might become a product, method, tool, or intervention, but there is no data to support it.
3	**Analytical and Experimental Data Collected.** You have preliminary data showing the key element of your idea works, but the complete technology has not been validated.
4	**Components Validated in Laboratory Setting.** You've combined the key components and tested the integrated version in your own lab or classroom (controlled conditions).
5	**Components Validated in Relevant Environment.** You have tested the technology or its key components under conditions that more closely represent how and where it will ultimately be used.
6	**Prototype Demonstrated in Relevant Environment.** Your working prototype or representative model has demonstrated that it works in conditions closely resembling its actual intended use.
7	**Prototype Validated in Operational Environment.** A near final, field-ready pilot deployed and tested under real-world conditions.
8	**Technology Completed and Qualified.** The final technology has passed formal testing and is ready for its intended use and operating environment
9	**Technology Proven in Operational Use.** The final technology has been successfully used in its intended real-world environment, and its performance has been demonstrated in practice.

II. Purpose and Goals

PIPP provides pilot funding and structured support to advance NCCU investigators' early-stage research, concepts, and emerging technologies toward the level of readiness required to compete for NCI funding, while strengthening NCCU's capacity to pursue state and national commercialization opportunities. Funded projects will advance the following goals:

1. **Advance technologies to TRL 3 or higher** by supporting targeted technical development, proof-of-concept testing, and prototyping activities that move projects out of the earliest stages of research (TRL 1-2) and into a position where they meet NCI's minimum eligibility requirement.
2. **Build funding and commercialization readiness and strengthen connections to NC's innovation ecosystem** by facilitating faculty participation in NCI workshops and connecting investigators with complementary resources, programs, and opportunities offered through NCCU campus and external partners - First Flight Venture Center, NCBC, regional accelerators, and other innovation partners.
3. **Prepare competitive NCI submissions** by guiding PIPP awardees through NCI's Project Eligibility Request, Pre-Application, and invited Full Application stages, including coordination with NCI Regional Director and Entrepreneur in Residence.
4. **Strengthen NCCU's applied research and commercialization pipeline** by increasing the number of NCCU-led projects that are eligible for, and successful in securing, NCI and other translational research funding.

By the end of the funded period, it is anticipated that awardees will have advanced their technology to a demonstrated TRL of 3 or higher, completed required training components, and be positioned to submit a competitive NCI Project Eligibility Request in the Fall of 2027. To learn more about the NCI Grant Process, follow this link (www.ncinnovation.org/process).

III. Responsive and Eligible Projects

Consistent with NCI's industry-agnostic approach, PIPP funding supports investigators' early-stage research, concepts, and emerging technologies across all disciplines and industry sectors represented at NCCU.

Faculty whose technologies are not yet at TRL 3 and are interested in pursuing NCI funding during the Fall 2027 grant cycle are encouraged to apply. Eligible projects must:

- Begin below TRL 3 and demonstrate a credible, well-defined pathway to achieve TRL 3 or higher during the PIPP award period.
- Demonstrate commercialization and economic potential, with a plausible pathway toward licensing, startup formation, industry partnership, or another form of technology transfer.
- Be appropriately scoped for pilot or seed funding, with achievable milestones and deliverables that can be completed within the PIPP award period and advance the project toward NCI readiness.

IV. Funding Information

- Up to three (3) awards.
- Projects can request up to $12,000 in direct costs.
- Project Period: 8 months.
- Funds awarded must be spent within the award budget period.
- Requests for a no-cost extension will not be approved.
- Allowable and unallowable costs will follow NCCU, state, and federal guidelines.

V. Eligibility

This opportunity is open to all NCCU faculty and staff engaged in applied research, innovation, or technology development that has not yet reached the minimum readiness level for NCI funding (i.e., below TRL 3), regardless of discipline, rank, or career stage.

Eligible applicants must schedule a consultation with the PIPP Coordination Team. To schedule a consultation, please follow this link: tinyurl.com/PIPP-consult.

If your research is at a TRL 3 or above, please contact Dr. Undi Hoffler at uhoffler@nccu.edu, to learn about upcoming NCI opportunities.

VI. Key Dates

Release Date:	
Consultation Deadline tinyurl.com/PIPP-consult	November 10, 2026
Full Application Deadline tinyurl.com/PIPP-apply	December 10, 2026, at 11:59 pm
Anticipated Award Notification	January 11, 2027
Anticipated Project Start Date	January 19, 2027

VII. Contact Information

For additional information about this RFA, please contact the PIPP Coordination Team: Dr. Crystal Lee Pow Jackson at cleepowj@nccu.edu and Dr. Undi Hoffler at uhoffler@nccu.edu.

VIII. Application Components and Format

Submitted applications must include single-line spacing, font no smaller than Arial 12, and margins no smaller than 0.5 inches and no larger than 1 inch. Applications must include the following components:

1. **Table of Contents** (no page limit)

2. **Project Information** (2-page limit)
   Project Abstracts must include:
   - **Project Title**
   - **Applicant Name(s)**
   - **Department, Institute, or Unit of applicant(s)**
   - **Proposed Budget Amount**

- **Project Summary** (limit to 500 words): Concise, non-technical summary of the proposed project that clearly states what market the technology addresses, the specific problem the technology is solving, the technology's current Technology Readiness Level (TRL), the target TRL to be reached by the end of the award period, and the anticipated path to NCI eligibility.

3. **Project Narrative** (limit to 5 pages):
The Project Narrative is intentionally structured to align with the six criteria NCI uses to evaluate Full Applications (see NCI's Request for Proposals www.ncinnovation.org/rfp). Thoroughly addressing each prompt below will strengthen your PIPP application while helping you begin developing the information needed for a future NCI Project Eligibility Request, Pre-Application, and/or Full Application.

   At this early stage of technology development, **you are not expected to have complete or final answers to every prompt**. Applicants should provide the best information currently available, identify areas that require further development or validation, and describe how PIPP support will help address those gaps and advance the project toward NCI readiness.

   3.1 Market Problem and Significance *([mirrors NCI Criterion 1: Significance])*
   Identify the societal or market need this project addresses, and, if known, any information or data that helps estimate the potential market size or demand. State the project's current TRL and provide justification for that rating. Briefly state the unique value the proposed technology, product, or service would provide to its target market, and how it would differentiate from existing solutions. Describe the technical or scientific innovation involved and the expected mode of delivery to end users (e.g., device, material, software, service). Describe the current state of any invention disclosure, patent application, copyright, or other IP protection related to this project. If none exists yet, describe what would likely be included in a future invention disclosure or patent application.

   3.2 Research Team and Institutional Resources *([mirrors NCI Criterion 2: Research Team and University Infrastructure])*
   Describe the research team, including any university or community collaborators, and the institutional resources available to support the project (e.g., facilities, core labs, equipment, departmental support).

   3.3 Regional Alignment and Impact *([mirrors NCI Criterion 3: Regional Alignment and Impact])*
   Describe how this project aligns with NCCU's mission and the broader NC innovation ecosystem, and its potential regional economic development impact, such as job creation, licensing, or startup formation, when the project eventually reaches commercialization.

   3.4 Commercialization Potential *([mirrors NCI Criterion 4: Commercialization Potential])*
   Describe the target customer or end user, any market research or customer discovery conducted to date (or planned), the competitive landscape and alternatives, and a

preliminary commercialization pathway (e.g., licensing, startup formation, industry partnership).

3.5 Industry Engagement *([mirrors NCI Criterion 5: Industry Engagement])*
Describe any current or potential industry partner(s) and their anticipated role. If no partner has been identified yet, describe your plan for identifying and engaging potential industry partners during the PIPP award period.

3.6 Approach, Milestones, and Anticipated Challenges *([mirrors NCI Criterion 6: Approach and Milestones])*
Describe your proposed approach for advancing the project to TRL 3 or higher and any anticipated technical, regulatory, or logistical challenges and how you plan to address them. Note how this approach positions the project to meet NCI's Project Eligibility criteria.

4. **Project Timeline** (limit to 1 page)
   Applicants must include a project timeline outlining the specific technical milestones and activities required to advance the project from its current TRL to TRL 3 or higher. Timelines must include a start-up period that allows adequate time to obtain required research approvals, such as Institutional Review Board (IRB), Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC), conflict-of-interest, CITI training, and other regulatory or compliance approvals, as applicable.

5. **Budget and Budget Justification** (no page limit)
   A detailed, itemized budget and budget justification (narrative) that clearly explains and supports all requested costs. The budget should be appropriate for the scope of the proposed project and align with NCCU and federal funding guidelines. Indirect costs, travel, personnel cost, or publication fees are not allowable expenses under this funding opportunity. These funds must be applied directly to research expenses. Applicants must format their budget using NIH PHS 398 Form Page 4. Applicants are encouraged to use the budget justification template provided by OSRP.

6. **CV** (limit to 5 pages each):
   A current curriculum vitae (CV) of Principal Investigator(s), highlighting relevant expertise, prior research accomplishments, and contributions to science or scholarship. The CV should demonstrate the capacity to carry out the proposed work and may include education and training, current and prior positions, relevant publications and creative outputs, grants and awards, and other scholarly activities.

7. **Multiple Principal Investigator (Multi-PI) Plan** (limit to 1 page):
   For applications proposing multiple Principal Investigators, a Multi-PI Plan is required. This plan should describe the rationale for a multi-PI approach and clearly define each PI's roles and responsibilities. Applicants must explain how the complementary skills of the PIs strengthen the proposed project and enhance its likelihood of success.

All application components must be combined and submitted as a single PDF titled "PIPP Pilot Application – Principal investigator Name(s)

Submit application using the form found here: tinyurl.com/PIPP-apply. Applications are due by December 10, 2026, at 11:59 pm. Incomplete applications or applications received after this deadline will not be considered.

IX. Review Criteria

Applications will be evaluated based on responsiveness to program goals, feasibility of reaching TRL 3 or higher within the award period, and potential for eventual NCI competitiveness.

Reviewers will assign numeric scores for each criterion.

1. Significance, Innovation, and TRL Advancement Potential (36 points)

Reviewers will evaluate:

- Is the market problem or societal need, and its potential impact, clearly articulated?
- Is the current TRL clearly and credibly documented?
- Is the proposed technical approach sound and well-justified?
- Are milestones for reaching TRL 3 clear, achievable, and appropriately scoped for the award period?

Scoring Guidance

- **31-36 (Exceptional):** Clear current TRL; highly credible, well-resourced plan to reach TRL 3+ within the award period.
- **25-30 (Very Good):** Credible plan with minor gaps in technical detail or timeline.
- **13-24 (Adequate):** Plan is plausible but underdeveloped or insufficiently resourced.
- **0-12 (Poor):** Current TRL or technical approach is unclear; limited likelihood of reaching TRL 3.

2. Commercialization and Funding Readiness (28 points)

- Is there a clear target customer/end user and understanding of the competitive landscape?
- Is there a credible commercialization pathway (licensing, startup formation, industry partnership)?
- Is there a credible pathway toward an NCI Project Eligibility Request and Pre-Application following PIPP?
- Has the team identified potential industry partners, customer discovery activities, or IP considerations?

Scoring Guidance

- **22-28 (Exceptional):** Compelling, well-informed pathway to NCI submission and commercialization.
- **15-21 (Very Good):** Strong potential with minor gaps.
- **8-14 (Adequate):** Potential exists, but plans are underdeveloped.
- **0-7 (Poor):** Little evidence of commercialization or funding readiness.

3. Regional Alignment and Industry Engagement (18 points)

- Does the project align with NCCU's mission and regional economic development goals?

- Has the team identified, or planned to engage, potential industry partners?

Scoring Guidance

- **14–18 (Exceptional):** Strong, well-articulated alignment with NCCU's mission and regional economic development priorities; team has identified and is actively engaging potential industry partner(s).
- **10–13 (Very Good):** Clear alignment with regional priorities; industry partners identified or a credible engagement plan is in place.
- **6–9 (Adequate):** Alignment and/or industry engagement is present but underdeveloped or generic.
- **0–5 (Poor):** Little or no evidence of regional alignment or industry engagement.

4. Approach, Milestones, Feasibility, and Team Capacity (18 points)

- Is the proposed approach and milestone plan realistic and appropriately scoped for the 9-month pilot period?
- Is the budget appropriate and well-justified for the proposed work?
- Have anticipated challenges been identified, with reasonable mitigation plans?
- Does the investigative team have the appropriate expertise and capacity to conduct the project successfully?
- Can the project realistically be completed within the pilot period?

Scoring Guidance

- **14–18 (Exceptional):** Realistic, well-scoped approach and milestones; appropriate budget; highly qualified team; anticipated challenges paired with sound mitigation plans.
- **10–13 (Very Good):** Feasible approach with minor gaps in milestones, budget, or team capacity.
- **6–9 (Adequate):** Significant feasibility, budget, or capacity concerns; approach or milestones unclear.

X. PIPP Management & Awardee Support

PIPP is administered by NCCU's Office of Research Compliance and Technology Transfer. In addition to project funding, awardees will receive structured guidance and support designed to advance technology development, strengthen commercialization readiness, and position promising projects for future NCI funding opportunities.

Awardee support will include:

- **Training and networking opportunities** focused on Technology Readiness Level (TRL) assessment and advancement, intellectual property and technology transfer, commercialization fundamentals, and relevant innovation resources.
- **Individualized guidance from ORCTT** to help awardees address project-specific technology development, intellectual property, commercialization, and translational needs.
- **NCI application readiness support**, including assistance with preparing a future NCI Project Eligibility Request and Pre-Application and facilitating engagement with the appropriate NCI Regional Director and Entrepreneur-in-Residence.
- **Milestone-based project monitoring and feedback** to assess progress, identify challenges, refine development priorities, and support achievement of project objectives during the award period.

- **Connections to the broader innovation ecosystem**, as appropriate, to help awardees identify additional technical assistance, mentorship, commercialization programs, and follow-on funding opportunities.

XI. Reporting, Evaluation, and Metrics

Awardees are expected to participate in PIPP project evaluation activities and submit a final project report

During the award period and following participation in PIPP, the Office of Research Compliance and Technology Transfer will monitor:

- Progress toward project milestones and advancement in Technology Readiness Level (TRL)
- Development of prototypes, proof-of-concept data, validation results, or other technology-development outputs
- Intellectual property disclosures, patent activity, licensing opportunities, and other commercialization outcomes
- Submission of NCI Project Eligibility Requests, Pre-Applications, and Full Applications, as applicable
- External grant or follow-on funding submissions and awards
- Industry, entrepreneurial, or other innovation ecosystem partnerships
- Publications, presentations, and other relevant scholarly or technical outputs
- Longer-term progression toward commercialization, licensing, startup formation, or industry partnership

These measures will be used to assess PIPP's effectiveness in advancing early-stage technologies and strengthening the pipeline of NCCU projects positioned for NCI and other translational or commercialization funding opportunities.

Note: De-identified data may be used for internal assessment and scholarly dissemination.