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\$1.5 Million MA3 Challenge Launches to Modernize Academic Hiring and Promotion Systems in U.S. Colleges and Universities

Today the [Open Research Community Accelerator \(ORCA\)](#), in partnership with the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Aspen Institute Science & Society Program, launches the [Modernizing Academic Appointment and Advancement \(MA3\) Challenge](#). Backed by \$1.5 million in prize funding from the generous support of the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, the Dana Foundation, the Rita Allen Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, this initiative invites U.S. colleges and universities to transform academic hiring, review, promotion, and tenure practices. The Challenge seeks bold, creative strategies to develop academic reward systems that foster a collaborative, responsive, and transparent research environment.

At a time when public trust in science is wavering and academic advancement often relies heavily on outdated criteria, the MA3 Challenge catalyzes institutions to align their reward structures with their institutional missions and values. While colleges and universities often champion ideals like knowledge sharing, contributions to the public good, and community engagement, their appointment and advancement systems over-rely on publication counts and prestige metrics. The Challenge invites applicants to propose concrete reforms elevating activities like open science, public engagement, civic science, team science, and diverse contributions to knowledge that advance these values.

“For research, science, and scholarship to effectively serve society and accelerate discovery, academic appointment and advancement systems need to evolve,” said Dr. Erin McKiernan, ORCA’s Director of Programs & Strategies, who is also a leading scholar on research assessment and review, promotion, and tenure (RPT) practices. “This Challenge creates space for bold experimentation. It gives institutions and departments the opportunity to test new approaches and generate blueprints that others can learn from and adapt.”

The Challenge will award up to six \$250,000 grants for institution-wide or large-division reform efforts, and up to six \$50,000 grants for department, center, or institute-level winners. In addition to financial support, awardees will form a community of practice, which will meet regularly over the two-year duration of the program to exchange insights, troubleshoot obstacles, identify promising avenues for reform, and accelerate learning across the cohort.

Submissions are encouraged to address questions such as:

- How can academics effectively communicate their work to other scholars, the public, practitioners, and policymakers?
- How can academics meaningfully engage with impacted communities and populations in their research lifecycle?



- How can evaluation systems incorporate and elevate diverse contributions to the scholarly record?

Full proposals are due by January 8, 2026, at noon PT, and must include a two-year implementation-focused plan and budget. Funds may be used for activities such as faculty workshops, stakeholder convenings, policy change efforts that embed specific values-aligned language into advancement and hiring criteria, new technologies, and staff time.

“The Academy is involved in the MA3 Challenge because we are committed to advancing science, engineering, and technology in the public interest,” said Academy President Laurie Patton. “Reimagining academic incentive systems can support young scientists in this difficult funding climate and better align research with impact by recognizing those who strengthen scientific literacy, inform public policy, and work across sectors to turn new ideas into societal benefit.”

To further the effort, the ORCA team is collaborating with the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Aspen Institute Science & Society Program to promote the Challenge. Moreover, ORCA and the Academy will host a convening in late 2025 with higher education administrators who will serve as thought leaders and partners on next steps for this work.

About ORCA

The **Open Research Community Accelerator (ORCA)** is a non-profit focused on making science more engaging, accessible, and actionable. More about our work may be found at <https://www.orcaopen.org/work>

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