

Apply for Cohort 8 (2027-2028) of the Students Participating as Ambassadors for Research in Kentucky (SPARK) Program

Deadline: October 12, 2026

Apply online: <https://medicine.uky.edu/centers/chet/spark-applications>.

OVERVIEW: SPARK is a dynamic collaboration between the Center for Health, Engagement, and Transformation (CHET), [Aetna Better Health of Kentucky](https://medicine.uky.edu/centers/chet/spark-program), and other university and philanthropic partners. You can read more about the program here:

<https://medicine.uky.edu/centers/chet/spark-program>. The purpose of the SPARK program is to train undergraduate students at the University of Kentucky from a broad range of backgrounds, experiences, and communities to conduct impactful research to improve health disparities. Students are introduced to community-engaged research focused on health disparities and receive extensive mentorship.

ELIGIBILITY: Any undergraduate students at the University of Kentucky with at least two academic years left until graduation and a GPA of 2.8 or higher are invited to apply for SPARK. We seek talented students interested in developing research expertise, implementing projects in health disparities, and exploring careers in health disparity research.

RESOURCES AND BENEFITS: Students will receive excellent research training, faculty and community mentorship, a **\$5,000** summer stipend, ample resources for their research project (up to **\$3,000** for project expenses), and professional development opportunities.

PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS:

1. Enroll in [BSC 390](#) during the Spring 2027 Semester
2. Attend weekly meetings with the SPARK Director during the Summer 2027, Fall 2027, and Spring 2028 semesters
3. Attend meetings with assigned UK research mentor during the Spring 2027, Summer 2027, and Fall 2027 semesters
4. Dedicate 5 hours per week during the Spring 2027, Fall 2027, and Spring 2028 semesters to complete project and program milestones
5. Dedicate 25 hours per week to the SPARK Summer Research Intensive from May 2027 - August 2027 (conducting your individual research project).
6. Attend group professional development and experiential learning sessions throughout the program.
7. Present research findings *in-person* at a conference at the University of Kentucky in the spring of 2028.
8. Respond to all communication (email, calls, etc.), complete all assignments, and provide information promptly and professionally for the duration of the program.
9. Due to the intensive nature of the SPARK Program, and to ensure students reap the most benefit from their experience, successful applicants who choose to accept the SPARK offer cannot participate simultaneously in other research training programs.

RESEARCH PROJECT:

In collaboration with mentors, students develop a research question and a small research study. Students conduct this project in their home communities over the summer, receiving funds to

support their research. After implementing the project, students meet with their mentors, undertake data analysis and write-up, and present and publish their research in professional settings.

Students accepted into the program will be **required** to complete a research project in one of the following areas. Projects will include primary data collection with human subjects (i.e. surveys, interviews, or other appropriate forms of data) and focus on a health disparity issue. You may read about previous student projects here: <https://medicine.uky.edu/centers/chet/spark-alumni>.

- Recovery, Evidence Based Treatment for Substance Use Disorders, Tobacco Policy, Harm Reduction, and Peer Support (Dr. Amanda Fallin-Bennett <https://nursing.uky.edu/people/amanda-fallin-bennett>)
- Perinatal and infant mental health, early relational health, environmental and psychosocial influences on mental health [social drivers], and community-engaged research methods (Dr. Sheerah Keith <https://education.uky.edu/people/sheerah-keith>)
- Community belongingness, health equity, intersectionality, LGBTQ+, mental health, minority stress, social determinants of health, youth violence prevention, health policy implementation, and firearm policy (Dr. Keith Watts <https://socialwork.uky.edu/college-directory/keith-watts/> and Dr. Phillip Jordan <https://www.linkedin.com/in/phillip-e-jordan-drph-m-a-9323b120/>).
- Cognitive aging and factors that may contribute to cognitive vulnerability and resilience in later life; the influence of social, behavioral, environmental, or health-related factors on cognitive and brain health; the use of a lifecourse lens to examine cognitive health (e.g., early childhood experiences and cognitive trajectories/cognitive outcomes in later life) (Dr. Darlingtina Esiaka <https://medicine.uky.edu/users/dkes222>)
- Addressing health disparities among underserved populations, specifically early detection and prevention efforts for lung cancer (smoking cessation, cancer screening) among individuals with mental health challenges (Dr. Bassem Abu-Farsakh <https://bhwell.uky.edu/people/bassem-mahyoub-mahmoud-abu-farsakh>).

WHERE: The SPARK program will take place primarily in person. Meetings and training sessions are both anticipated to occur at the Health Kentucky Research Building at the University of Kentucky. When necessary, remote options will be made available.

TIMELINE:

January-May 2027

- Research Training (BSC 390)
- Begin group manuscript
- 1-on-1 weekly research mentor meetings
- Develop research project
- Obtain IRB approval

May-August 2027

- Collect data for research project
- 1-on-1 weekly research mentor meetings
- Periodic group meetings
- Draft project abstracts and manuscript sections

- Continue working on group manuscript

August-December 2027

- Continue research activities – data analysis and scholarly product development
- Weekly fall group meetings - book club, project check-ins, follow-up data analysis training, continue developing and submitting abstracts and manuscript sections
- Finalize group manuscripts for submission

January-May 2028

- Complete research activities – present findings in professional settings
- Periodic group SPARKler meetings
- Abstract development and conference submission
- SPARK Site Visit
- Conference presentation travel requests
- **Presentation of research findings at UK research conference**
- SPARK Certificate Ceremony
- Final SPARK evaluation and exit interview

APPLICATION PROCESS: The application deadline is **October 12, 2026 at 11:59pm**. Please submit your application online at the following link: <https://medicine.uky.edu/centers/chet/spark-applications>. The required application components include:

1. Personal statement (limited to two pages) describing your overall interest in health disparities research, topic(s) of interest that align with mentor expertise, and your career goals
2. Resume, including GPA and major
3. A list of three professional references with contact information
4. A letter of support from **one** of your three listed professional references emailed to chet@uky.edu
5. Unofficial transcript (Freshmen applicants may include their most recent unofficial high school transcript.)

Select applicants will be invited for a 30-minute Zoom interview.

For more information about SPARK and eligibility, please visit:

<https://medicine.uky.edu/centers/chet/spark-program> and/or contact Ariel Arthur at ariel.arthur@uky.edu

Resume and cover letter resources: <https://studentsuccess.uky.edu/stuckert-career-center/services>