AAMC

External Relations Group Awards for Excellence

2027 Guidelines and Instructions

Table of Contents

Important Dates & Deadlines **4**
Entry Fee & Eligibility **5**
Components of an Entry **6**
Award Categories **9**
Advancing Institutional Excellence Initiatives 9
Electronic Communications 9
Print and Digital Publishing 10
Special Events, Projects, Programs, or Campaigns 10
Writing Awards 10
The “Shoestring” Award 11
Best in Show Award: Judges’ Choice 11
Scoring **12**
Judging **14**
Recognition **14**
Awards for Excellence Contacts **15**

Dear External Relations Colleagues,



Across academic medicine, you help advance your institution's mission in meaningful ways every day. Whether you're telling stories of discovery, engaging alumni, strengthening community partnerships, supporting philanthropy, or elevating the value of academic medicine, your work makes a lasting impact.

The External Relations Group Awards for Excellence are an opportunity to pause, reflect on those accomplishments, and share them with colleagues across the country. Too often, we move from one project to the next without recognizing the creativity, collaboration, and dedication behind our work. I hope you'll take this opportunity to celebrate your successes, tell your story, and inspire others through the work you've done.

These awards recognize the most creative and effective approaches to advancing academic medicine through alumni relations, communications, community relations, development, and marketing.

It is truly a privilege to serve as chair for this year's competition. One of the things I value most about our External Relations Group is our willingness to learn from one another. By sharing our best work, we spark new ideas, strengthen our profession, and amplify the collective impact of our schools, hospitals, and communities.

On behalf of the External Relations Group Steering Committee and our panel of judges, I invite you to submit your work for consideration. We look forward to reviewing your entries and thank you for all you do in support of academic medicine.

James A. Molnar, M.B.A. (he/him/his)
Supervisor, Communications & Digital Media
College of Medicine and Life Sciences
AAMC External Relations Group Awards Chair

Important Dates & Deadlines

Date	Deadline
August 3, 2026	Call for Entries Opens *Eligible entries must have occurred between April 1, 2025 and July 31, 2026.*
August 3-October 15, 2026	Call for Entries Submission Window
September 5, 2026	Early Bird Discount Ends
October 15, 2026	Call for Entries Closes *Finalize and submit your entry online before the deadline of 11:59 pm PT. Deadline extensions are not granted.*
October 2026-December 2026	Judging
January 2027	Notification *All entrants receive notification of entry status and feedback.*

Entry Fee & Eligibility

- Submitted projects and programs must have occurred or been completed between **April 1, 2025** and **July 31, 2026**.

- Entries must be sponsored by an individual External Relations Group member who is in good standing.*
    - Work performed by a non-External Relations Group member employed directly by the entering institution (full-time or permanent part-time employee, not a freelancer) must be sponsored by an External Relations Group member in good standing from that institution.
    - The External Relations Group member sponsor confirms that all people involved or associated with the entry have demonstrated standards of professional ethics and scientific integrity.**

- Entries must be the work of AAMC member institution medical school, academic health system, or teaching hospital staff submitting the nomination and should accurately characterize the work and role of outside agencies, consultants, or vendors. Projects done completely by outside agencies or consultants are not eligible.

- Each award submission requires an **entry fee**, payable online at the time of entry via credit card only: MasterCard, Visa, American Express, or Discover. You will receive a payment confirmation and receipt via email once confirmed. The AAMC does not accept entry fee payment by check. Entry fees are nonrefundable.
    - Early Bird Entry Fee: $40
        - August 3-September 5
    - Standard Entry Fee: $50
        - September 6-October 15

- The current Awards for Excellence (AFE) Chair and other External Relations Group members from that institution are not eligible to compete in this year's awards program. For this year, **The University of Toledo College of Medicine and Life Sciences** staff are not eligible. Staff at this institution are eligible to submit in next year's program.

- Judges must not score submissions from their own institution and should recuse themselves from those reviews.

- Judges may review entries submitted by affiliated organizations that operate under separate executive leadership from their own. The AFE Chair will make the final decision about the eligibility of an entry.

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*A member in good standing is an alumni relations, communications, community relations, development, or marketing representative from the External Relations Group who works at an AAMC member institution and whose membership dues are current and paid in full. Contact the External Relations Group at externalrelationsgroup@aamc.org, for confirmation of membership or to become a member.
** Please see AAMC's Policy on Honors and Awards for more information.

Components of an Entry

Entries must be submitted via the online portal.

All entries, including the narrative and supporting entry materials, must be uploaded into the online system. ***Do not mail any documents to the AAMC.***

Your entry must contain the requested online portal project information, narrative, supporting documents, entry fee payment, and AAMC policy acceptance.

The online portal will also collect the following information in addition to the narrative and supporting materials:

- Award Entrants and External Relations Group Sponsor
- Project Information
    - Brief summary of entry (200 words maximum). If selected for an award, this summary will be used on the External Relations Group Awards website and other award materials.
    - Most impactful part of the entry.
    - What's one thing you learned or a challenge you faced in this project?
    - Total cost of program/project, excluding staff salaries.
    - Number of staff involved in the project.
    - Was an agency or consultant involved? If so, what did they contribute and what percentage of work did they do?

Narrative

Each entry must be accompanied by a written narrative that contains a goal, a strategy statement, and objectives stating how the submitted project addressed a need or helped solve a problem. This narrative must clearly outline the rationale for the project and measurable outcomes obtained.

The narrative is your opportunity to tell the judges your story—help them understand the situation you and your institution faced. The narrative is as important as the supporting materials because it provides the foundation of your submission.

Narratives for all categories except for Writing Awards* must be **double-spaced;** use **Times New Roman, Arial, or Calibri 12-point font; be no more than four (4) pages in length;** and include the following components:

- **Entry Number:** This number is provided during the time of online entry form submission.
- **Summary**: A short account of the project, program, or publication. Provide a concise (200 word limit) description of the overall idea.
- **Goals**: Outline the need or opportunity that the project addresses. Questions to keep in mind include the following: What were you trying to accomplish? What results did you hope to achieve? Was the project used to solve a problem? Where did the problem start? What are its effects? What need were you looking to fill?
- **Solution/Strategy**: Explain and outline your strategy: Describe the steps you took, the options you had, and the decisions you made. Give us an account of the thought process that went into your decisions; how did you decide to pursue one option over another?
- **Measurements**: Describe the metrics used to define success and the results and impact of your project, both within your organization and your targeted audience. Include as many relevant analytics as possible. Provide an evaluation of how well the solution targeted the problem or need, using specific and measurable outcomes. If a survey tool was used, submit a copy. If you took an existing idea and reimagined it for your own institution, let the judges know how it is different. How did it add value to your organization?
- **Innovation**: Overall creativity and innovation of the entry. Does the entry have the potential to be adapted and used by other institutions?
- **Advancing Institutional Excellence**: There is demonstrated commitment to maximizing opportunities for people of all backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences.

Writing Award Entry narratives should be **double-spaced;** use **Times New Roman, Arial, or Calibri 12-point font; be no more than four (4) pages in length;** and include the following components:

- **Entry Number:** This number is provided during the time of online entry form submission.
- **Summary**: Provide context for the piece and describe the intended audience.
- **Goals**: Outline the need or opportunity that the piece addresses. Questions to keep in mind include the following: What was the writer trying to accomplish? Was the piece used to solve or address a problem? What results did the writer hope to obtain?
- **Strategy**: Explain and outline the writer's strategy: Describe the steps the writer took, the options they had, and the decisions they made. Give us an account of the thought process that went into the writer's decisions.
- **Measurements**: Describe the results of the piece, both within the organization and the targeted audience. Provide metrics/analytics wherever possible.

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- **Originality**: Does the entry have a strong, unique, and compelling narrative voice and story structure?
- **Innovation**: Overall creativity and innovation of the entry. Was a fresh angle taken on the topic?
- **Advancing Institutional Excellence**: Whenever possible, there is demonstrated commitment to maximizing opportunities for people of all backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences.

Supporting Entry Materials

Each entry must include supporting materials highlighting your entry. This may include, but is not limited to, magazines, articles, photos, video/audio files (included with the entry in the portal, via a weblink, and/or an online drive link), promotional materials from an event or campaign, screenshots of websites and/or apps, and more. If you have multiple links to share, please put them into a PDF or Word document and submit them to the supporting documents section. Please note, each supporting document must be uploaded into a new block on the submission form—do not upload a document on top of a previous one. **All supporting materials must be submitted to the online portal and NOT mailed to AAMC.**

Award Categories

Advancing Institutional Excellence Initiatives

This category recognizes innovative and impactful initiatives or campaigns demonstrating commitment to maximizing opportunities for people of all backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences. Entries must be the work of an institution's alumni relations, communications, community relations, development, or marketing units. Please include the extent to which the initiative has not only achieved its own goals, but also contributed to the institution's mission and the advancement of academic medicine. Possible entries in this category include, but are not limited to, alumni and volunteer programs, multimedia content (podcasts/videos/photos), donor/campus events, annual reports, community outreach/dialogues, social media campaigns, internal/external communications, and recruitment initiatives.

Electronic Communications

This category recognizes innovative and strategy-driven digital, multimedia, and online projects. Entries must be the work of an institution's alumni relations, communications, community relations, development, or marketing program. Outside technical assistance is permissible, but concept, organization, and design must be the work of the entrant.

A. Audio and Video

Entries in this category may include, but are not limited to, video news releases, radio or broadcast advertising, podcasts, special event audio and video, or multimedia presentations. Narratives, files, and/or links to supporting materials (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo, or items in a Drop Box) must be submitted online.

B. Websites

Entries in this category include website-based projects, such as internal or external websites or consumer/constituent portals developed to support an institution, campaign, program, or special initiative. Narratives, which should be uploaded into the online form, may include screenshots or point out particular features of the site to help convey the impact of your project. Links to websites must be included in the narrative and/or the supporting documents.

C. Social Media

Entries in this category must make unique and strategic use of interactive online communications, communities, or social networks and can include, but are not limited to, blogs and pages/sites or campaigns on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and/or other platforms. Narratives, which should be uploaded into the online form, may include screenshots or point out particular features of the project to help convey the impact of your project. Links to relevant social media sites must be included in the narrative and/or the supporting documents.

Print and Digital Publishing

This category recognizes innovative digital and print publishing. Entries must be the work of an institution's alumni relations, communications, community relations, development, or marketing program. Outside technical assistance is permissible, but concept, organization, and design must be the work of the entrant.

A. Single or Special Issue
This category is for single or special issue print and digital publishing. Entries in this category may include annual reports, fundraising or marketing collateral materials, community impact or community service reports, patient information or education materials, commemoratives, or any other non-periodical publications.

B. External Audience
This category is for print and digital periodicals intended for external audiences. Examples included in this category are medical school, academic health system, or teaching hospital magazines and newsletters produced primarily for external constituencies (e.g., patients, referring physicians, alumni, donors, community leaders, or other external groups). Entries must include two consecutive issues of the periodical.

C. Internal Audience
This category is for print and digital periodicals intended for internal audiences. Examples included in this category are magazines, newsletters, and other serial publications intended primarily for employees and/or faculty of a medical school, academic health system, or teaching hospital. Entries must include two consecutive issues of the periodical.

Special Events, Projects, Programs, or Campaigns

This category serves as a "catch all" category. If your project does not fall into one of the other Awards for Excellence categories, you may submit it here. Possible entries in this category include, but are not limited to, alumni programs, donor events, engagement or fundraising events, crisis management, alumni reunions, mock interviews, annual campaigns, capital campaigns, media relations initiatives, brand development and special promotion, community outreach and communication, and more.

Writing Awards*

Entries may include articles in internal publications, online publications, annual reports, brochures, magazine articles, newsletters, case statements, or other published works. Submitted pieces are not subjected to a word limit.

A. Basic Science Staff Writing
Entries include articles about basic and bench research. Basic science articles must be written by a staff member of a medical school, academic health system, or teaching hospital.

B. General Staff Writing
Entries include articles about any other topic related to science or medicine that is not basic or bench research. General articles must be written by a staff member of a medical school, academic health system, or teaching hospital.

C. Solicited Articles
This category is for articles written by freelancers, alumni, students, or patients; however, a medical school, academic health system, or teaching hospital staff member/editor must have worked closely with the writer in developing, soliciting, shaping, and editing the piece. The editor's role in the submitted article should be explained in the narrative.

D. News Releases Entries include news and/or media releases of any nature for any audience showcasing the ability to explain complex information in an informative and engaging manner. The entry should be written by a medical school, academic health system, or teaching hospital staff member.

*Due to new AAMC policy, awards are presented on behalf of the AAMC and its affinity groups and will not be named in honor of an individual.

The "Shoestring" Award

Projects of special merit with a significantly reduced, limited, or minimal budget will be recognized in this category. Appropriate projects are one-time or first-time initiatives or the continuation of existing programs with reduced resources. (If the latter, provide this year's and last year's budgets and samples from both years.) No dollar maximums are established for this category.

Best in Show Award: Judges' Choice

Best in Show is a judges' choice award that recognizes overall program excellence. Entries that include comprehensiveness, productivity, impact, and overall excellence as a result of the program or project implementation may be considered for this honor. Demonstration and impact of a comprehensive strategy, goal achievement, and implementation of objectives designed for significant impact are vital. All entries submitted to the 2027 Awards for Excellence competition may be eligible to receive this award. This award is given at the discretion of the Awards for Excellence judges.

Scoring

Entries will be judged according to criteria listed for each category. In addition, commonly accepted standards of professional excellence will apply.

Advancing Institutional Excellence Initiatives

- Summary: Narrative clearly describes entry and demonstrates level of accomplishment
- Goals: Analytic approach and objectives achieved are documented
- Solution/Strategy: Detailed strategy, tailored to target audience/goals, audience engagement
- Measurement: Clearly defined metrics, analytics, impact, and return on investment (ROI)
- Innovation: Overall creativity and innovation and potential for adaptation by other institutions
- Advancing Institutional Excellence: Demonstrated commitment to maximizing opportunities for people of all backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences and advances institution's mission.

Electronic Communications

- Summary: Narrative clearly describes entry and demonstrates level of accomplishment
- Goals: Analytic approach and objectives achieved are documented
- Solution/Strategy: Detailed strategy, tailored to target audience/goals, audience engagement
- Measurement: Clearly defined metrics, analytics, impact, and ROI
- Innovation: Overall creativity and innovation and potential for adaptation by other institutions
- Advancing Institutional Excellence**:** Demonstrated commitment to maximizing opportunities for people of all backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences and advances institution's mission.

Print and Digital Publishing

- Summary: Narrative clearly describes entry and demonstrates level of accomplishment
- Goals: Analytic approach and objectives achieved are documented
- Solution/Strategy: Detailed strategy, tailored to target audience/goals, audience engagement
- Measurement: Clearly defined metrics, analytics, impact, and ROI
- Innovation: Overall creativity and innovation and potential for adaptation by other institutions
- Advancing Institutional Excellence: Demonstrated commitment to maximizing opportunities for people of all backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences and advances institution's mission.

Special Events, Projects, Programs, or Campaigns

- Summary: Narrative clearly describes entry and demonstrates level of accomplishment
- Goals: Analytic approach and objectives achieved are documented
- Solution/Strategy: Detailed strategy, tailored to target audience/goals, audience engagement
- Measurement: Clearly defined metrics, analytics, impact, and ROI
- Innovation: Overall creativity and innovation and potential for adaptation by other institutions
- Advancing Institutional Excellence**:** Demonstrated commitment to maximizing opportunities for people of all backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences and advances institution's mission.

Writing Awards

- Summary: Narrative clearly describes entry and demonstrates level of accomplishment
- Goals: Analytic approach and objectives achieved are documented
- Strategy: Detailed strategy, tailored to target audience/goals, audience engagement
- Measurement: Describe the results of the piece, both within the organization and the targeted audience; provide metrics and analytics as much as possible
- Communicative Quality: Opening sentence/paragraph, readability, organization, interest, use of quotations, overall creativity
- Mechanics: Sentence structure, readability and comprehension, spelling, punctuation, grammar
- Originality: Strong, unique, compelling narrative voice and story structure
- Innovation: Fresh angle and overall creativity and innovation
- Advancing Institutional Excellence**:** Demonstrated commitment to maximizing opportunities for people of all backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences and advances institution's mission.

The "Shoestring" Award

- Summary: Narrative clearly describes entry and demonstrates level of accomplishment
- Goals: Analytic approach with special budgetary constraints and objectives achieved are documented
- Solution/Strategy: Detailed strategy with special attention to financial limitations, tailored to target audience/goals, creative use of resources, audience engagement
- Measurement: Budget and cost constraints and clearly defined metrics, analytics, impact, and ROI
- Innovation: Overall creativity and innovation and potential for adaptation by other institutions
- Advancing Institutional Excellence**:** Demonstrated commitment to maximizing opportunities for people of all backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences and advances institution's mission.

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Judging

A panel of 24 External Relations Group members will review entries and select winners. The Awards Chair will serve as facilitator of the judging and, if necessary, an alternate judge. Judges will score each entry based on the criteria for the category and will provide constructive comments on each entry. Entrants will receive a brief summary of the judges' comments—regardless of awarded status. It is possible to have more than one gold, silver, bronze, or honorable mention recipient in a category. Judges are not required to issue awards for each category, so not every category will have gold, silver, bronze, and honorable mention award recipients.

All 24 members of the judging panel and the Awards Chair will determine the winner of the Best in Show if granted.

Please note: Your entry is evaluated solely based on the stated judging criteria and not in competition with other nominations in the category.

Recognition

Winning an Award for Excellence is a national honor, and entrants may receive a Gold, Silver, or Bronze Award for Excellence. Entries may also receive an Honorable Mention, acknowledging the quality of an entry.

All Awards for Excellence winners receive an award certificate or trophy. Awardees are also recognized—

- In External Relations Group publications and social media.
- On the External Relations Group website.
- At the annual AAMC External Relations Conference.
- Via an optional Awards for Excellence seal to display on your work.
- With an optional press release to share the news about your Award for Excellence.

In addition, Gold winners will receive a free 2027 AAMC External Relations Conference registration. The Best in Show winner will receive a free 2028 AAMC External Relations Conference registration. Institutions will decide who can use the free registration, to be facilitated by the official points of contact of the award-winning submissions.

All 2027 winners will be notified in writing no later than January 2027, except for Best in Show, which will be announced at the 2027 AAMC External Relations Conference. Awards for Excellence recipients are required to provide photographs and additional information about the winning entry to be used for awards displays and in External Relations Group publications.

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Awards for Excellence Contacts

Questions about the competition? Not sure which category to submit an entry? Having problems submitting an entry via the online portal? Please contact us—we are here to help!

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