

Thomas J. Watson Fellowship



FELLOWSHIP ADVISING & STUDY ABROAD OFFICE

Thomas J. Watson

Raised in rural upstate New York, Thomas J. Watson Sr. was best known for building IBM from its formation in 1914 until his passing in 1956. Now over a century old, IBM's teams built the American social security system, guided the first human flight to the moon, and re-invented cancer treatment. The Thomas J. Watson Research Center includes twelve labs on six continents and has produced six nobel laureates.



Overview



“The Thomas J. Watson Fellowship is a one-year grant for purposeful, independent exploration outside the United States.

The Watson Fellowship is a rare window after college and pre-career (or pre-graduate school) to engage your deepest interest on a global scale. Fellows conceive original projects, execute them outside of the United States for one year, and embrace the ensuing journey.”

Overview, cont'd



Candidates must devise their own study program. This fellowship should provide substantial contact with another culture or cultures.

This year should not involve extended foreign study at a university. Rather, the applicant's proposal should be one that fosters independence and be of personal significance.

View the official overview video [here](#).

Watson Fellow Expectations



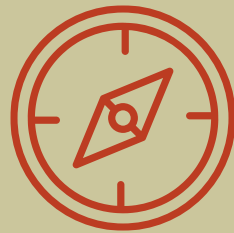
Everyone who participates in the program must :

- Attend the pre-departure webinar (spring 2026)
- Depart by August 1 of the award year
- Remain outside of the United States for twelve consecutive months
- Remain outside countries that are US State Department Level 3 or 4, under US Treasury sanction, or designated CDC Level 3
- Submit quarterly reports and an end of year expense report
- Attend the returning fellows' conference (August 2027)

ELIGIBILITY

- Applicants may be U.S. citizens, permanent residents, or foreign nationals.
- Applicants must be **graduating seniors** attending one of the approximately forty colleges whose students may apply for a Watson, including Caltech. However, the application process will begin your junior year.
- **No specific grade point**, language skill or specific major is required; applicants must be able to develop a creative, interesting, and feasible proposal for a year of independent “study” and travel.

WHY APPLY?



Adventure



Enthusiasm



Discovery

SELECTION CRITERIA

Qualities sought in the selection of fellows include:

- Leadership
- Imagination
- Independence
- Emotional Maturity
- Courage
- Integrity
- Resourcefulness
- Responsibility



APPLICATION DEADLINES

Deadline **April 23** by 5 pm (pacific)

Meet with Elizabeth to discuss your Watson project no later than **April 18**. Contact her directly to coordinate.

Application document (with all required components) emailed to SAapplications@caltech.edu.

Reference writers email documents directly to SAreferences@caltech.edu.

APPLICATION COMPONENTS

- Application forms (*3 pages*)
- 1500-word personal statement
- 1500-word proposal
- 2-3 letters of reference using Watson form
- Supplemental information (*proposed budget, contact list, & visa information*)
- Transcript (*unofficial OK*)

Application directions and forms will be posted on the FASA site: fasa.caltech.edu/fellowships.

SUCCESSFUL PROPOSAL

Watson Fellowship project markers:

- 1. Organic**
- 2. Inspiring**
- 3. Open**
- 4. Bold**
- 5. Realistic**
- 6. Connected**
- 7. 3-Dimensional**





PLEASE NOTE

Remember, at least one of your letters of recommendation **must** be from someone at Caltech, typically a faculty member; references will be emailed to the FASA office directly.

You must select countries with a current US State Department Level 1 or 2 designation.

Watson Fellows are required to begin their travel the summer they are selected (will be no later than August 1, 2026).

Safety is a key priority for the Watson Fellowship.

A petri dish containing a bacterial culture with yellow spots on a white agar surface, set against a background of a white lab coat.

LIANA MERK, BIOENGINEERING '21

“Cultures Across Cultures”

Iceland, Greece, Inner-Mongolia/China, Japan, Ireland, & Switzerland

Merk's project took her around the world to sequence and study the DNA of bacterial cultures within local yogurts. Many different countries have some form of fermented milk similar to yogurt, but the fermentation processes vary widely, along with the types of microbes that produce the product.

Merk looked for genetic signatures that indicate how strains of bacteria have traveled and evolved across cultures.

“Invented almost 8000 years ago, yogurt has embedded itself across cultures, with communities developing their own ways of making, propagating, and sharing it. By living with dairy farmers, hearing deep-rooted family traditions, and sequencing microbes from local yogurts, I will learn how yogurt affects both bacterial diversity and diversity of thought.”



“Cultures Across Cultures”

“I would recommend as daunting as the process seems, just start now. Finding open doors will take time, and those will fuel your excitement to keep creating your project.

The application has a personal statement and proposal component. I would recommend going through at least a few rounds of editing on these, and it will help your recommenders immensely if they can at least see a rough copy of these, so they can write better recommendations. So aim to have a draft by beginning of (March), meaning you have about a month and a half to create an idea and get at least a few contacts.”

Saehui Hwang, Electrical Engineering '22

“Touching Humankind: Wearables for Society”

Togo, Switzerland, China

“Engineering is a powerful tool for social equity. My project channels this passion through the design of human-centered wearable devices. From students to first responders, athletes to patients, my Watson year explores broad applications of wearables to serve the needs of populations that are too often overlooked.”

In Togo, Hwang worked with nonprofit organizations that endeavor to eliminate barriers to education. There, she looked for opportunities to improve the educational outcomes of schoolchildren through the use of wearable educational devices.





Saehui Hwang, Electrical Engineering '22

Saehui has travelled to Switzerland, where she is designing wearable devices that can track the well-being of police officers during strenuous training protocols. "These are people who suffer from fatigue on the job. If we could monitor their performance throughout their service, we could prevent injuries before they happen," she says.

In Switzerland, she will also explore the potential for designing performance-monitoring tools for Paralympics athletes.

Saehui will then travel to China to work on using printable conductive ink to create wearable electronic circuits.



FAQs

1. How to approach drafting your idea & advice on how to get started?

Meet with Elizabeth; advising appointments may be in-person or via Zoom.
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2. Can I apply for the Watson directly to the Watson Foundation?

No, Watson Fellowship applicants must be formally nominated and submitted by one of the partner universities.

3. How do I find project contacts?

You can find opportunities and people to work with through faculty, cold-emailing, and internet research (research centers, professional conferences, published works, etc.).



FAQs, cont'd

4. Can I travel to places where I have lived or studied before?

Projects should involve travel to places where you have not lived or studied for a significant length of time (more than 4 weeks). Exceptions include places you traveled as a young child and have no memory, and "vast land" countries such as Brazil.

5. Can I make changes to my project after I receive the Fellowship?

If you are awarded a fellowship and discover compelling reasons to alter your project scope, you may propose changes to the program office.

6. General advice to consider for a successful application?

Consider your audience and select locations that best fit for the project. This application takes time so start now. Applications are due late-April, but your project will continue to evolve.

RESOURCES

Caltech Watson Advisor: Elizabeth Nugent (enugent@caltech.edu)

Available for emails, Zoom, or in person meetings.

FASA Library: open 8-5 pm M-F (*Office closed for 12-1 lunch hour*)

FASA website: <http://www.fasa.caltech.edu/fellowships>

Watson website: <https://watson.foundation/fellowships/tj/fellows>

US State Department Travel Advisory site:

<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories.html/>

Country entry restrictions or requirements:

<https://www.ciee.org/about/blog/health-risk-index-report>

[Travel.state.gov](https://travel.state.gov)

Questions?

