NASA SBIR 2010 Phase I Solicitation

O3.02 ISS Utilization

Lead Center: JSC

Participating Center(s): ARC, GRC, KSC, MSFC

NASA is investigating the near- and mid-term development of highly-desirable systems and technologies that provide innovative ways either to leverage existing ISS facilities for new scientific payloads or, to provide on orbit analysis to enhance capabilities and reduce sample return requirements.

Current utilization of the ISS is limited by available upmass, downmass, and crew time as well as by the capabilities of the interfaces and hardware already developed. Innovative interfaces between existing hardware and systems which are common to ground research could facilitate both increased, and faster, payload development.

Desired capabilities include, but are not limited to, the below examples.

- Enabling additional cell and molecular biology culture techniques. Providing innovative hardware to allow for safe, contained transfer of cells from container to container within the Microgravity Sciences Glove Box (MSG) would permit new types of studies on ISS. On orbit analysis techniques that would reduce or remove the need for downmass - such as a system for gene array tests, or kits for DNA extractions for long term storage - are also examples of hardware possibilities that would extend and enable additional research.
- Providing compact Dynamic Light Scattering (DLS) hardware. Development of a compact robust DLS instrument based on diode lasers and photo detectors capable of providing significant power and weight savings would make it possible to measure the diffusion coefficient of experimental systems using the Light Microscopy Module (LMM). This peer-reviewed science was considered a decade ago but not developed due to technology limitations. It should now be possible to measure diffusion coefficients from which the molecular temperature of the location being viewed could be deduced for known particles and solvents using the Stokes-Einstein equation. Innovative additions of a local oscillator used in conjunction with analog detectors could mitigate errors introduced by stray light.
- Providing compact laser tweezers and supporting software. Development of a compact robust Holographic Laser Tweezers (LT) instrument based on the recent developments of holographic techniques could expand the types of experiments conducted on orbit. This peer-reviewed science was previously considered but not developed because of the size and technology limitations of a decade ago. LT holds open the possibility of performing scientific experiments that manipulate groups of particles that evolve uniquely in space when gravitational sedimentation and jamming no longer exist. Any new LT and its corresponding
control software should allow for tracking of particle positions in 3D (before the concentration becomes too high) and impart rotational forces. Being able to accurately track the position of particles while measuring the forces on them is important for laying the foundations of colloidal engineering. Novel self-calibration methods could be added to commercially available designs to further enhance the instrument and its capabilities. The instrument would need to meet the size and volume limitations of the Light Microscopy Module (LMM).

- Providing additional on-orbit analytical tools. Providing flight qualified hardware that is similar to commonly used tools in biological laboratories could allow for an increased capacity of on-orbit analysis thereby reducing the number of samples which must be returned to Earth. Examples of tools that will reduce downmass or expand on-orbit analysis include: sample handling tools; mass measurement devices; a (micro)plate reader; a mass spectrometer; non-cryogenic sample preservation systems; autonomous in-situ bioanalytical technologies; centrifuges for analysis and for providing fractional-g environments; microbial and cell detection and identification systems; and fluidics and microfluidics systems to allow autonomous on-orbit experimentation and high throughput screening.

- Providing Nanorack compatible inserts to enable additional life science payloads. Development of 1, 2 and/or 4 cube design biological payload hardware for use with the ISS Nanorack platform would decrease the need for development of multiple control racks and reduce development time of future payload experiments.

- Enabling additional payloads. Innovative methods for further subdividing payloads lockers would allow for numerous pico-payloads. Developing multi-generational or multi-use habitats would reduce the upmass and downmass required to conduct biological experiments on ISS.

The existing hardware suite and interfaces available on ISS may be found at: http://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/station/science/experiments/Discipline.html

For all above technologies, research should be conducted to demonstrate technical feasibility during Phase I and show a path toward Phase II hardware and software demonstration and delivering a demonstration unit or software package for NASA testing at the completion of the Phase II contract.

Phase I Deliverables: Written report detailing evidence of demonstrated technology (TRL 5 or 6) in the laboratory or in a relevant environment and stating the future path toward hardware and software demonstration on orbit.

Phase II Deliverables: Hardware and/or software prototype that can be demonstrated on orbit (TRL 7).