



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Prior Approval

When should I submit a Prior Approval Request?

Prior approval is required only for exceptional or nonstandard travel arrangements. Submit a request before making any purchase when your itinerary includes:

- Extended stays.
- Multi-city travel.
- A departure or return airport different from your home institution.
- Non-U.S. carriers.
- Travel outside standard program dates.
- Driving long distances instead of flying.
- Medical or accessibility accommodations.
- Any itinerary that exceeds reimbursement limits.

Prior approval is an exception review, not a reservation or guarantee of reimbursement.

Complete the Prior Approval Form before purchase and wait for a written decision. NITMB may approve, deny, limit, or place conditions on a request based on the invitation letter, available funding, cost comparisons, policy requirements, and applicable federal rules. A submitted or pending request is not approval. Costs purchased before written approval are at the traveler's own risk and may not be reimbursed.

How does the prior approval process work?

1. Submit the Prior Approval Form before purchase.
2. Include the complete proposed itinerary, a standard policy-compliant comparison, costs, and the reason for the exception.
3. NITMB reviews the request for policy compliance, allowability, funding, and any required federal approval.
4. Wait for a written decision. The decision may approve, deny, limit, or condition the request.
5. Book only after written approval and follow the approved itinerary and reimbursement limit. Changes require a new review.

Prior Approval Form: <https://app.smartsheet.com/b/form/f5b16a8dac734564b1fd2a77c9892e7c>

What documentation should I include with my request?

Provide complete documentation that allows NITMB to compare the requested exception with standard, policy-compliant travel. Depending on the request, include:

- Flight comparisons.
- Screenshots or PDFs of alternate itineraries.
- Cost comparisons.
- Explanation of business or personal travel being combined with the NITMB trip.
- Supporting documentation required for a medical or accessibility exception.



Flights & Travel Dates

Can I arrive early or leave after the program ends?

Only in limited circumstances. Travel outside the approved program dates is considered nonstandard and must not be booked unless written prior approval is received. Approval is not automatic. The request must show that the exception is necessary or cost-effective and does not increase NITMB's reimbursable cost. Accept responsibility for booking and paying for your own lodging, meals, local transportation, and all other expenses outside the NITMB-covered dates unless the written approval expressly states otherwise.

Do I need approval if I want to stay longer for personal travel?

Yes. A personal extension is an exceptional, nonstandard itinerary and requires written prior approval before purchase. Approval is not guaranteed. NITMB will consider only the documented cost of standard round-trip travel directly related to program participation, subject to the invitation letter and reimbursement cap. Accept responsibility for booking and paying for your own lodging, meals, local transportation, and all other expenses outside the NITMB-covered dates unless the written approval expressly states otherwise.

Can I fly on dates that are cheaper than the standard arrival and departure dates?

Possibly, but only as an exception approved in writing before purchase. Lower airfare alone does not guarantee approval. Submit the requested itinerary and a standard-date comparison. NITMB may deny the request or limit reimbursement to the lower eligible amount. You are responsible for lodging and other expenses outside the approved program dates.

Can I upgrade to premium seating or business class if I pay the difference?

You may purchase an upgrade with personal funds only after the underlying itinerary complies with policy. NITMB can reimburse no more than the approved economy-equivalent airfare up to the cap. Premium seating or business-class costs are not reimbursable.

Multi-City and Nonstandard Itineraries

Can I travel to or from Chicago from a location other than my home airport?

Only with written prior approval. Travel from or to a location other than your home or home institution is nonstandard and will be reviewed as an exception. Submit a standard home-Chicago-home cost comparison and explain the business or personal travel being combined. NITMB may deny the request, limit reimbursement to the eligible program-related portion, require cost allocation, or impose other conditions. The flight cap still applies.

Can I combine NITMB travel with another business travel, such as a conference, workshop, seminar, or collaboration visit?

Only with written prior approval. Combining NITMB travel with another business purpose is an exception and is not automatically reimbursable. Submit a standard home-Chicago-home cost



comparison and identify the other business purpose and funding source. NITMB may deny the request or reimburse only the documented portion attributable to NITMB, subject to the flight cap and any written conditions.

Can NITMB reimburse only one leg of my trip?

Possibly, but only if approved in writing before purchase. Submit a standard home-Chicago-home cost comparison and the complete proposed itinerary. NITMB may deny the request or limit reimbursement to the documented leg or amount directly attributable to program participation, subject to the flight cap.

Fly America Act & International Travel

<https://www.gsa.gov/policy-regulations/policy/travel-management-policy-overview/fly-america-act>

Can I use a non-U.S. airline?

Use of a non-U.S. carrier is not automatically permitted. Because NITMB travel is supported by U.S. federal awards, the itinerary must comply with the Fly America Act or a documented exception. Submit the Prior Approval Form before booking and wait for written approval. If approval is denied or not obtained before purchase, the airfare may be non-reimbursable.

What if a U.S. carrier is significantly more expensive or requires much longer travel times?

Submit a prior approval request before booking. Price or convenience alone does not qualify as a Fly America Act exception. The request will be reviewed against the applicable federal criteria, and approval is not guaranteed.

A non-U.S. carrier may be considered only when a documented Fly America Act or Open Skies exception applies, including the circumstances below. Meeting a listed circumstance does not by itself constitute NITMB approval; written approval is still required before purchase:

1. When a U.S. air carrier is not available.
2. When using a U.S. carrier service would extend the travel time by 24 hours or more.
3. When a U.S. carrier does not offer a nonstop or direct flight between origin and destination, and using a U.S. carrier:
 - Increases the number of aircraft changes outside the United States by two or more;
 - Extends travel time by six hours or more; or
 - Requires a connecting time of four hours or more at an overseas interchange point.
4. When the flight time from origin to destination is less than three hours and using a U.S. flag carrier doubles the flight time.
5. When there is an applicable [Open Skies Agreement](#) in effect that meets the requirements of the Fly America Act.

The exceptions provided by the Open Skies Agreements for government-funded travel do not apply if your transportation is funded by the Department of Defense.

Note: Ticket cost and convenience are NOT exceptions to the Fly America Act.



What if there are no direct flights from my city?

Use a policy-compliant connecting itinerary whenever reasonably available. Nearby-airport, rail-connection, or other nonstandard arrangements require prior approval when they differ from the standard itinerary. Submit the full itinerary and cost comparison before purchase and wait for a written decision.

Driving, Rail, and Ground Transportation

Can I drive instead of fly?

Driving under 300 miles is automatically approved only when the mileage documentation requirements are met. Driving over 300 miles is an exception requiring advance review and an airfare comparison. NITMB may deny the request or limit reimbursement to the applicable comparable airfare or other approved amount.

Can I travel by train or bus instead of flying?

Economy or coach bus and rail travel may be reimbursable within the stated policy limit. This is not approval for premium service or a nonstandard itinerary. Travelers departing from outside Illinois must retain comparable airfare documentation, and any itinerary that otherwise departs from policy requires written prior approval before purchase.

Hotels & Extended Stays

Will NITMB pay for extra hotel nights if I arrive early or stay later?

No. NITMB covers lodging only for the approved program period. Additional nights are personal expenses unless an exceptional need is specifically approved in writing before the stay. Submitting a request does not guarantee that additional lodging will be covered.

Medical Considerations

What if I have a medical condition that affects my travel plans?

Contact NITMB before booking so the request can be reviewed through the appropriate accommodation and approval process that requires approval by the National Science Foundation. Cabin-class changes for medical reasons require additional documentation and approval under federal award rules. Do not purchase a nonstandard arrangement until written approval is received. Requests for change in cabin class for medical reasons must be approved by the National Science Foundation due to US federal award rules. A medical certificate or a signed, dated doctor's letter written on clinician letterhead will need to be provided to request approval. NITMB cannot reimburse the cost of the upgrade. The flight cap still applies.