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Behavioral & Brain Sciences

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October 27, 2023

The Honorable Bill Cassidy
Ranking Member
Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee
Washington, DC 20510
Sent via email: NIHModernization@help.senate.gov

Dear Senator Cassidy,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the thoughtful and comprehensive list of questions about opportunities to modernize the National Institutes of Health (NIH). On behalf of the Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences (FABBS), I look forward to ongoing collaboration to best serve the mission of NIH.

FABBS represents 29 scientific societies and over 60 university departments whose scientific members and faculty share a commitment to advancing knowledge in the sciences of mind, brain, and behavior. Our members bring expertise on the human element of health such as cognitive functioning, memory, stigma, risk calculation, etc., and are eager to serve the NIH mission. When it comes to human health, behavioral and biomedical science are fundamentally intertwined. Every disease, virus, organ is attached to a whole human who is part of a family, in a community – these contexts impact health from uptake, to access, to treatment adherence. FABBS members appreciate the NIH funding that makes it possible to pursue their basic research questions and are grateful for the consistent budget increases over the past decade.

Below please find responses to select questions where FABBS members have specific experiences and/or expertise to contribute to your laudable goal of modernizing NIH.

Increasing the Pace of Science

Funding

Thanks to Congress for significant and consistent funding increases to the NIH budget, NIH has made critical discoveries in medicine and technology. However, according to a report from the Information Technology & Innovation Foundation ([*Healthy Funding: The Critical Role of Investing in NIH to Boost Health and Lower Costs*](#), March 2019), the funding as a share of GDP peaked in 2003 and declined through 2015. Adequate funding to keep pace with inflation is essential to the success of NIH.



Furthermore, continuing resolutions - not to mention threats of shutdowns - have become the norm in Washington, DC leading to needless uncertainty and inefficiency for NIH and other federal agencies. Science is a long-term endeavor that requires predictable and sustained funding. Ensuring continued, uninterrupted funding would enable NIH to focus on the critical work at hand.

Balancing the Scientific Process with Targeting Cures for Specific Disease

Recognizing the important oversight responsibility of Congress and specifically the Senate HELP Committee, FABBS encourages Congress to empower NIH leadership and the scientific peer review process to identify the most promising lines of inquiry.

In testimony to Congress, former NIH Director Dr. Varmus frequently spoke about the scientific process, explaining that progress in basic science could not be planned or predicted. Instead, new therapies and interventions were more likely the result of inspired, persistent, and often unforeseen explorations by scientists with the flexibility to follow their curiosity, instincts, and build on findings over many years. FABBS encourages Congress to resist attempts to be overly directive of NIH funds to fight against specific diseases, especially if the state of scientific knowledge did not warrant hope for a quick cure. Dr. Varmus is on record referring to “wars” on cancer and other high-profile but complex diseases, to be ‘an unproductive diversion of personnel and resources.’ ([Basic Science and Congressional Politics: NIH Director, 1993-1999](#))

Bolster the Integration of Behavioral and Social Science Research Across NIH

As Dr. Collins left his role as the Director of NIH, he reflected on the COVID-19 pandemic lamenting that it never occurred to him that once we had an effective vaccine people would refuse to take it. He wished “we had more insights from behavioral social-science research...” and also “Boy, there are things about human behavior that I don’t think we had invested enough into understanding.” As you work to modernize NIH, FABBS encourages you to consider what we can learn from these blind spots and what NIH can do to build in behavioral and social science considerations moving forward to better prepare for the next pandemic and increase the pace of science.

Fortunately, the NIH has developed and their Council of Councils have approved two reports that provide a roadmap for improving the integration of the behavioral and social sciences - these reports should be fully leveraged to increase the rate and rigor of progress.

- [Trans-NIH Research Opportunities in the Basic Behavioral and Social Sciences](#) (May 2021) identifies promising and emerging areas of basic behavioral and social sciences research (bBSSR) relevant to the NIH mission that are not currently adequately supported. Of particular note is the limited investment in Epigenetics, the integration of genetics and social/environmental influences given the fast pace of discovery.



- [Integration of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research at the National Institutes of Health \(NIH\)](#) (May 2022) identifies opportunities to achieve greater integration of the behavioral and social sciences at the NIH to more fully realize the benefits of this research to overall health.

The [Office of Behavioral and Social Science Research](#) is well positioned to support advances detailed in these two reports. This Congressional created office sits in the Office of the Director and serves a critical coordinating role across institutes and centers. This structure is extremely efficient providing expertise, guidance, and training to effectively serve the mission of individual institutes.

Additional Flexibility for Funding for Time Sensitive Research

NIH would benefit from additional flexibility and funding mechanisms to fund time-sensitive research in times of national health emergencies. As explained in this article ([How the NSF Moved Faster than the NIH During COVID-19](#), *Institute for Progress*, July 17th 2023) NSF was better prepared to make quick funding awards to conduct critical time-sensitive research.

Administrative Opportunities and Challenges

In addition to following the advisory councils (AC) for several individual NIH institutes, FABBS monitors advisory bodies for directorates at the National Science Foundation and the National Board of Education Sciences (NBES). FABBS has noted the value of having the OBSSR director serve on the NSF Social, Behavioral, and Economic Directorate AC and individuals from NICHD and the education directorate at NSF liaise to the NBES. Having a basic research concept evolve into a tangible teaching method or health intervention is federal funding for science at its best. While unfamiliar with the specific obstacles, FABBS members have expressed concerns that administrative barriers prevent more interagency collaboration.

Thanks again for inviting input on opportunities to modernize NIH. I look forward to continued engagement and would welcome any opportunity to be a resource to you and your staff.

Sincerely,

Juliane Baron

Executive Director