

July 10, 2024

Dear Members of the NIMH Director Search Committee:

Thank you for serving on the search committee for the next Director of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Your work comes at a particularly critical time for our country as we face cascading challenges including a youth mental health crisis, a loneliness epidemic, and growing environmental causes of mental illness. Thankfully, in part to the NIMH, we also have new and improved treatments as well as promising programs of research investigating contributors to these challenges including social determinants of health. The next NIMH Director will provide the vision for and make difficult decisions about how to best prioritize the most rigorous and impactful research.

We recognize that committee members will be considering a variety of criteria in evaluating candidates. The undersigned organizations strongly encourage you to prioritize a Director capable of leveraging the central role of basic and applied behavioral and social sciences and also neuroscience— including research with healthy humans – in developing an evidence base for building resilience and designing pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions to improve mental health and prevent mental illness.

Improving mental health and treating mental disorders depends on understanding fundamental processes involved in perception, cognition, emotion, memory, and motivation. For example, in schizophrenia, dysregulated language and memory is more predictive of negative outcomes than hallucinations or delusions. Recently, applications of fundamental information-processing theories of perception and action control have provided a more mechanistic understanding of autism that reduces stigma and gives autistic people effective tools to improve quality of life. Further, accurate early diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has been enabled by understanding basic mechanisms of attentional regulation, learning (especially fear conditioning) and affect regulation. Consider too that treatments that target cognitive, behavioral, emotional, or interpersonal conditions for individuals with diagnosable mental disorders are the most effective, more effective than those that act more directly or solely on cellular processes or brain structures.

In addition, while individual institutes must remain mission focused, NIMH is critical to serving the broader biomedical and behavioral goals of the NIH. Accordingly, we encourage the committee to recommend a Director with a strong understanding of how mental health challenges (anxiety, cognitive impairment, depression, stress), ecological contexts, and social determinants of health contribute to a range of chronic health conditions (cardiovascular, endocrine, metabolic) and overall chronic disease burden.

Commitment to multi-level, interdisciplinary team science, rather than an allegiance to a narrow mission, holds the greatest potential for meeting the broader goals of the NIH. Accordingly, we urge you to consider the evolution of the demand for incorporating

behavioral and social sciences into strategy development across a range of population health imperatives.

Notably, in July of 2021, the NIH updated the [NIH Wide Strategic Plan \(2021-2025\)](#) expanding objective 1 from 'advancing biomedical sciences' to 'advancing biomedical and behavioral sciences'. In May 2022, the NIH Council of Councils approved the Congressionally mandated report [Integration of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research at NIH](#), directing all institutes to incorporate the behavioral and social sciences throughout institutes (in strategic plans, representation on advisory committees). Just last month, the Office of Science and Technology Policy released [Blueprint for the Use of Social and Behavioral Science to Advance Evidence-based Policymaking](#) requiring all federal agencies to draw upon insights from these disciplines to most effectively serve their missions. These three examples demonstrate the increased recognition and potential value of these disciplines.

To truly move the needle on mental health in America, the next Director must draw from all levels of analysis in basic and intervention research - biochemical, systems neuroscience, behavioral, psychological, and sociocultural - to tackle our most pressing challenges.

Thank you for considering our input,

Academy of Behavioral Medicine Research
Academy of Psychological Clinical Science
American Anthropological Association
American Political Science Association
American Psychological Association
Association for Psychological Science
Behavioral Medicine Research Council
Coalition for the Advancement and Application of Psychological Science
College on Problems of Drug Dependence
Consortium of Social Science Associations
Council of Graduate Departments of Psychology
Council of University Directors of Clinical Psychology
Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences
Flux: The Society for Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience
International Congress of Infant Studies
International Society for Developmental Psychobiology
National Register of Health Service Psychologists
Society of Behavioral Medicine
Society for Digital Mental Health
Society of Experimental Social Psychology
Society for Psychophysiological Research
Society for Research in Child Development
Society for Research on Adolescence