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How do you use the NIMH Strategic Plan for Research?

The Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences (FABBS) is a coalition of 29 scientific societies and 60 academic departments that come together to advance our disciplines. NIMH is a critical source of funding for FABBS scientists working to increase our understanding of mental health and illnesses. FABBS and our members use the NIMH strategic plan in three primary ways: to better understand the NIMH research priorities, to evaluate and assess the adequacy of the NIMH research portfolio, and to measure the progress and success of NIMH in reaching stated goals.

The current update to the NIMH strategic plan is an important opportunity to leverage this critical messaging document to correct and clarify the breadth of the NIMH portfolio. Under the leadership of Dr. Tomas Insel, NIMH dramatically reduced funding for the behavioral and social sciences. Following his retirement, Dr. Insel, acknowledged that funding neuroscience at the expense of behavioral science failed to ‘...bend the curve for death and disability.’ ([The ‘Nation’s Psychiatrist’ Takes Stock with Frustration, NYT 2.22.22](#)). His successor, Dr. Joshua Gordon, consistently spoke about the rigor and potential value of research proposals as the key considerations rather than using a disciplinary litmus test. However, the broad perception that NIMH will only fund proposals with a brain scan persists, discouraging innovative and promising basic behavioral and cognitive science.

Furthermore, not all corners of NIMH have updated their language and practice to reflect a move away from systematically deprioritizing behavioral and social sciences. For example, FABBS recently heard from a researcher after her highly rated F32 was rejected by the program officer, citing the language below.

“Lower priority is given to research plans that lack brain outcome measures, e.g., those proposing to use only behavioral and/or peripheral, surrogate measures (e.g., salivary cortisol), and research plans that propose to model mental illness syndromes (i.e., models “of” a mental illness).”

The decision to reject the proposal on these grounds was particularly confounding because the researcher had considerable training with brain scans and was pursuing the training award to build complementary behavioral and social science skills.

This language appears on the Office of Research Training and Career Development (ORTCD) website, within the Division of Neuroscience and Basic Behavioral Science (DNBBS). FABBS notes that we did not find similar language on the ORTCD Division of Services and Intervention Research (DSIR) site.

FABBS encourages NIMH to use this strategic plan update to correct the residual community and internal perception that NIMH categorically deprioritizes behavioral, cognitive, and social science.

Which content in the NIMH Strategic Plan for Research is particularly useful?

FABBS appreciates that the NIMH strategic plan is a living document, with annual progress updates. FABBS particularly values the sections on Scientific Stewardship and Management and Accountability.

Which content in the NIMH Strategic Plan for Research is not useful?

The current wording of “Goal 1: Define the Brain Mechanisms Underlying Complex Behaviors” is overly narrow and should be broadened to encompass more interdisciplinary approaches, methods, and research questions including from the cognitive neurosciences, peripheral nervous system, and behavioral sciences. FABBS encourages NIMH to remove the word “Brain” from this goal. Broadening the language would invite research on underlying mechanisms across complex relationships and systems. FABBS recommends expanding Objective 1.3 to include mechanisms broadly rather than limited to neural circuits.

FABBS appreciated the strong consideration of Social Determinants of Health (SDOH). However, the plan does not reflect the tremendous amount of work yet to be done to better understand, measure, and address SDOH. It would be useful to provide a more comprehensive framework and detailed strategies, specifically targeting social science research.

What is missing from the NIMH Strategic Plan for Research?

Overall, the plan would benefit from a more explicit incorporation of the behavioral sciences, cognitive neuroscience, and basic systems neuroscience.

FABBS is concerned that the plan lacks adequate acknowledgement of the societal context of mental illness. FABBS urges prioritizing research on higher order social and cultural dynamics that impacting broad populations beyond the individual mechanistic level. For example, consider ‘Suicide Prevention’ in the Challenges and Opportunities section. Given the nationwide nature of the crisis, NIMH needs to examine the potential societal or cultural contributing factors. While not entirely absent from NIMH’s plan, the language surrounding suicide prevention is too narrowly focused on screening and prevention at the individual level alone. Further, it is heavily focused on crisis response. NIMH should expand the focus to include more explicit language surrounding the investigation of disparities in suicide rates among the many communities mentioned throughout the plan.

Also missing from the plan is an adequate acknowledgement of research on health and resilience. NIH Director Bertagnolli has emphasized that NIH is the institutes of health, not disease or illness and that individuals and families would be better benefit from increasing NIH research to keep them healthy. We note, and appreciate, the inclusion of prevention under Cross Cutting Themes, FABBS cautions that prevention is not synonymous with cultivating health or building resilience.

While the plan references the Comprehensive Research Agenda under Cross Cutting Themes, FABBS suggests increasing attention to interdisciplinary frameworks and approaches and specifically the integration of behavioral and social sciences to advance understanding, prevention, and treatments throughout the plan. FABBS members also identified a need for more explicit incorporation of community-based participatory research.

FABBS members raised two current pressing crises and key omissions under Challenges and Opportunities.

Youth Mental Health - The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Youth Mental Health declared a crisis pointing to rising rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal behavior, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. It emphasizes the need for support systems, including family, schools, and communities, and calls for coordinated action to enhance access to mental health services and promote mental health literacy. Preventative measures and early intervention are crucial since "Mental health challenges are the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people".

Loneliness - Recent reports from the CDC and the U.S. Surgeon General highlight the critical issue of loneliness and its impact on public health. Loneliness and social isolation significantly impact health, increasing risks for depression and conditions like heart disease and stroke. These issues are widespread, affecting individuals across various demographics, particularly older adults and marginalized groups.

In reviewing the Goals, FABBS recommends expanding Goal 2 to include research on 'mental health' trajectories, in addition to 'Mental Illness Trajectories'. Further, this goal should include more discussion of social determinants of mental health/population health in the strategies.

Goal 3/Objective 3.1 aims to "Develop new interventions based on discoveries in genomics, neuroscience, and behavioral science." This further underscores the importance of explicitly including basic behavioral research in Goal 1.

Please share any feedback on the organization of the NIMH Strategic Plan for Research. For example, is it easy to find information of interest? Is there content that seems out of place?

FABBS recommends reorganizing and possibly reframing the current section on *Challenges and Opportunities*. This section would benefit from a clear order or clustering of sections. Currently, for an outside user, it is unclear if topics are challenges or opportunities or both. Another option would be to put headings in alphabetical order to facilitate returning to specific content.

Are there any other comments you would like to share?

FABBS encourages NIMH to update the current plan to better align with the NIH and federal government-wide increased incorporation of behavioral and social sciences. Notably, in July of 2021, the NIH updated the [NIH Wide Strategic Plan \(2021-2025\)](#) expanding Objective 1 '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 strategic plans and in representation on advisory committees.

More recently, in May 2024, the Office of Science and Technology Policy released [*Blueprint for the Use of Social and Behavioral Science to Advance Evidence-based Policymaking*](#) calling on all federal agencies to draw upon insights from these disciplines to most effectively serve their missions. These three examples demonstrate the centrality of these disciplines to health.

FABBS also encourages NIMH to more explicitly communicate how the NIMH portfolio compliments and integrates with other institutes to best accomplish the over arching goals of NIH. Too often FABBS members find their research proposals falling between the research portfolio gaps, for example youth mental health between NIMH and NICHD.

Many thanks for your thoughtful and extensive work on this important document to serve the critical mission of NIMH. FABBS greatly appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback and would be honored to be a resource.