



Federation of Associations in
Behavioral & Brain Sciences

FABBS Response: [RFI on the strategic plan for the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases \(NIAID\)](#) NOT-AI-24-032

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Submitted to: NIAIDStrategicPlanRFI@niaid.nih.gov

Please accept these comments on behalf of the Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences (FABBS), a coalition of 29 scientific societies and 60 academic departments that come together to advance the impact, rigor, and accessibility of our disciplines. Our members think deeply about and are committed to applying insights and knowledge from our sciences to benefit humanity, including to better health outcomes.

FABBS commends NIAID for supporting research that has led to new therapies, vaccines, diagnostic tests, and other technologies that have improved the health of millions of people in the United States and worldwide. However, during the COVID pandemic, the nation learned that vaccine alone, no matter how effective, rapidly developed, and widely available, was considerably less impactful if people were unwilling to take it. This is just one, very salient, example of behavioral science questions central to addressing infectious diseases.

These past several years the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the federal government more broadly, have actively increased attention to the importance of behavioral and social sciences. In 2020, NIH updated their strategic plan ([Update to NIH wide strategic plan 2021-2025](#)) expanding 'biomedical research' to include 'biomedical and behavioral research.' In May 2022, the NIH Council of Councils approved a Congressionally mandated report on the [Integration of the Behavioral and Social Sciences at NIH](#), making specific recommendations to every institute and center about how to better integrate these disciplines. Most recently, the White House released a [Blueprint for the Use of Social and Behavioral Science to Advance Evidence Based Policymaking](#) with recommendations for federal agencies.

FABBS offers several recommendations to the NIAID strategic plan to best serve the mission of the institute.

Specific Recommendations

- 1. Update the NIAID mission statement** to include behavioral sciences: "The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) conducts and supports biomedical and behavioral science research to better understand, treat, and prevent infectious and immune-mediated diseases."

- This change would align with the [Update to NIH wide strategic plan](#) (2021-2025) which includes 'Objective 1 - Advancing biomedical and behavioral sciences.'
- This recommendation follows the guidance of the Council of Council report [Integration of the Behavioral and Social Sciences at NIH](#): "As strategic plans are revised, or new strategic plans are developed, the NIH should ensure BSSR is more consistently included and linked to the IC mission and priorities."

2. Add a stand-alone research priority: "Advance and apply foundational research on human behaviors relevant to the NIAID mission, to minimize risk and maximize protective behaviors and intervention uptake." For every risk exposure, preventative action, intervention, and treatment, there are humans engaging in relevant behaviors, embedded within families and communities, making consequential decisions and choices. In addition, there are health care providers communicating with and advising patients. They do so in ways that may or may not leverage key factors identified by the behavioral and social sciences. Their behaviors will greatly impact - increase or reduce - the effectiveness of any treatment. FABBS offers bullets for the proposed priority.

- Increase understanding of **communication** practices - what works and what doesn't - and develop effective approaches, including a focus on the message and the messenger and modalities to increase protective behaviors (e.g., mask wearing, hand washing, social distance, proactive reporting/info sharing, medication adherence).
- Invest in **health literacy** to better understand where people get their information and from whom, how well do they understand statistics and the presentation of data? Foundational knowledge about health literacy has the potential to mitigate all infectious diseases.
- Expand knowledge about **implementation and dissemination strategies** to better understand the patient experience and decision-making process to increase uptake.
- Support research and **field testing of incentives and rewards** for preventive behaviors such as vaccine uptake.
- Advance the understanding of the role played by **culture, social networks, and social determinants of health** on both access to and uptake of prevention and treatment.

3. Weave behavioral and social science considerations into all priorities. Dr. Panchanathan, Director of the National Science Foundation often speaks about the behavioral and social sciences as being both 'vertical and horizontal'. In addition to supporting foundational research on human behavior, FABBS encourages NIAID to consider behavioral and social aspects of every disease and treatment to improve efficacy of biomedical research and biomedicine.

- Priority 3 - To the first objective: 'Advance HIV/ AIDS prevention strategies' add 'addressing social and behavioral risk factors.'
- Priority 4 - 'Apply knowledge of basic immunology 'and human behavior' to develop and enhance intervention strategies for asthma...'

In preparing this response, FABBS consulted eight prominent scholars who have made important research contributions during the COVID pandemic. It is worth noting the scientists' perception, that NIAID does not actively fund behavioral and social research. This perception is supported by the finding in the [Integration of the Behavioral and Social Sciences at NIH](#) report that reveals that NIAID invests only five percent of funding in these disciplines, a nominal amount compared to other institutes.

If NIAID hopes to attract research proposals from behavioral and cognitive sciences, it will need to proactively increase awareness, educate the community, and address the current perception that NIAID is an institute limited to the biomedical aspects of allergies and infectious disease. Updating the strategic plan would be an important start to signaling that NIAID is committed to supporting foundational research in these areas.

Upon his departure from NIH, Dr. Collins reflected that it had never occurred to him that once we had an effective vaccine, people would not take it. Many FABBS researchers were well aware of these risks, having studied trust, communication and decision making for many years. NIAID has an opportunity to reexamine the research portfolio and engage with scientists who could have helped NIH anticipate this blind spot during COVID.

For example, FABBS scientists are raising concerns about increased resistance to antibiotics, and the rapid evolution of viruses, may follow a similar fate. Is NIAID adequately investing in the human element of all that is contributing to the growing resistance to antibiotics such as patients requesting antibiotics even when not necessary, poor patient adherence to antibiotic regimens, or medical providers over prescribing antibiotics? These are the questions that scientists need to be asking and field testing, and NIAID would need to be funding, now.

Many thanks for the opportunity to share these recommendations. FABBS welcomes any questions or opportunity to be a resource as NIAID moves forward with revisions to the strategic plan.

Sincerely,

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