



November 20, 2015

To whom it may concern:

On behalf Population Association of America (PAA) and Association of Population Centers (APC), we are writing in response to NIH Guide Notice, NOT-OD-16-018, “Request for Information (RFI): Soliciting Input for the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR) FY 2016-2020 Strategic Plan.”

PAA is the premier professional, scientific society for more than 3,000 behavioral and social scientists—including demographers, sociologists, economists, epidemiologists and statisticians—who study the implications of population change. Our members conduct research and train young scientists at U.S. universities and independent research organizations. The APC is composed of approximately 40 federally funded, interdisciplinary population research centers nationwide.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is the primary source for federal discretionary grant funding for the population sciences, supporting research and research training activities conducted by individual scientists as well as similar activities at population research centers. The NIH Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR) has been an important partner by co-funding research projects, centers, and data collection efforts supported by NIH Institutes and Centers. Further, PAA and APC rely on OBSSR to represent the overarching interests of all of the behavioral and social sciences within the NIH. Therefore, we are pleased to respond to this initial request for input on the OBSSR five-year strategic plan. Specifically, our comments address “...critical challenges that currently hinder scientific advancement in the behavioral and social sciences, the resolution of which would have broad and transformative impact on the behavioral and social sciences.”

Population Health

Population health science directly addresses the NIH Mission (“nature and behavior of living systems”), by addressing the mechanisms that link multiple causes, operating at many different levels, to health. Population health science is an interdisciplinary and multi-method approach to producing knowledge, not a discipline in and of itself. It differs from traditional public health approaches in its focus on interdisciplinarity and emphasis on a strong integration of the social sciences alongside the behavioral and biomedical sciences. OBSSR must lead the way at the NIH to foster population health science given its mission in both social and behavioral science and the importance (given the NIH mission) of addressing health at population as well as individual levels.

As part of this emphasis in population health science, OBSSR should also support relevant research training programs. According to a recent report prepared for the IOM Roundtable on Population Health Improvement, few existing training programs at the doctoral and postdoctoral levels provide the competencies required for interdisciplinary population health science. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-supported Health & Society Scholars program, the

preeminent training program in population health science, will close in August 2016, leaving a serious gap in training opportunities in this field. OBSSR is well positioned to lead collaborative efforts for research and training activities in this area across multiple NIH institutes (e.g., NIMHD, NCI, NHLBI, NIDA, NICHD, NIA). A partnership with NIMHD, which has approved a concept for a training initiative in health *disparities* science, may be especially fruitful and useful to NIMHD. OBSSR should embrace the next five years as a critical window for investing in and promoting advances in the field of population health science.

Changing Population Dynamics

The health of our population is fundamentally intertwined with the demography of our population. Recognizing the connection between health and demography, OBSSR should encourage and support inter-agency as well as trans-NIH collaborations to understand more fully how the U.S. and world populations are changing, and the implications of these complex social, economic, and demographic changes. For example, more research and data collection are necessary to understand the health and demographic implications of the changing American family and the effects of population aging worldwide. In addition, research is necessary to update continuously how population dynamics and social processes influence behavioral change across the life course. With a relatively small investment of effort and resources in these areas, OBSSR could help advance and transform the population sciences over the next five years.

Emerging Advances in Data Collection and Access

Mobile technologies and advances in survey methodology are altering and challenging the population sciences. Social media, for example, is being used as a major tool for recruiting and sustaining participation in clinical trials and longitudinal surveys. More complex data linkages are now possible as the result of significant technological research advances. In this era of “big data” and rapid technological change, OBSSR should encourage research innovations and strategies to ensure data are accurate, accessible, and informative.

Prioritize Leadership Role

OBSSR must continue to prioritize its role representing the interests of the behavioral and social sciences, providing leadership on trans-NIH and interagency initiatives and facilitating inter-Institute and Center research collaborations. Further, OBSSR should continue encouraging input from the behavioral and social science research community on issues and initiatives affecting the field. Without OBSSR playing a prominent leadership role within NIH and the federal government, scientific advancement in the behavioral and social sciences will be hindered.

Thank you for considering our views as you revise the NIH OBSSR five-year strategic plan.

Sincerely,



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