

B/STARTing in the Right Direction

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By giving investigators the resources to develop pilot data, B/START supports the future generation of behavioral science researchers during a critical juncture in their development.

While funding opportunities for young investigators are still limited, the grant program represents significant progress in the effort to reverse a decline among junior researchers documented more than a decade ago. A 1988 study by the former Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration (ADAMHA) revealed that researchers under the age of 35 were receiving 13 percent of its grants, compared to 26 percent in 1980.

Soon after the study's release, APS spearheaded efforts to examine the loss of the researchers. In 1991, APS Executive Director Alan Kraut approached NIMH's then-Acting Director Alan I. Leshner with an idea of sponsoring a small group of behavioral scientists chosen by APS to analyze the issue and recommend solutions. The following year, an advisory group including Kraut, Toni Antonucci, Richard Bootzin, Rachel Clifton, James Jones, Charles Kiesler and Georgine Pion, held a meeting to discuss the issue with NIMH officials. Their efforts proved successful – a year later, NIMH published a program announcement for B/START.

Although no new studies on the number of funding opportunities for young investigators have been conducted, Kraut said *B/START* has provided funding opportunities to launch the careers of young investigators and provide valuable experience that will help them compete for larger grants.

“Less than a decade later, we already have a class of psychologists funded by B/START that is making significant contributions to behavioral science,” he said. “It’s one of the more satisfying things APS has done.”

Fellow advisory group members concurred. “It’s a very good first step,” said Bootzin, professor of psychology at the University of Arizona. “Research funding is often a very big hurdle.”

Bootzin believes NIH has been attentive to the issue of research funding for young investigators, as evidenced by the introduction of the R21 mechanism by NIMH in 1994, which is the “next step after B/START.” The grant is designed for exploratory or developmental research and allows investigators to conduct research on innovative ideas or develop new concepts or technologies.

Undoubtedly, more can be done to increase funding opportunities for young investigators, said Bootzin, noting that funding could be increased for *B/START* to support more investigators yearly.

The NIH has expanded B/START and similar programs already. In 1996, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) issued its first request for applications (RFA) for B/START and in 1999, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) began inviting applications as well. NIDA seeks

applicants to conduct studies on drug abuse and addiction while NIAAA encourages investigators to explore the behavioral factors in alcohol abuse.

Other NIH institutes, including the National Institute on Aging (NIA) and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), have launched grant programs modeled after B/START, though not devoted exclusively to behavioral research. The programs still benefit research psychology, Kraut said, because a considerable number of the grants are awarded to behavioral scientists.

Though the number of opportunities has expanded, applicants for B/START grants face stiff competition. Each year, 20 to 55 investigators are funded through by NIMH, which receives several hundred applications annually.