

NIH To Enhance Interdisciplinary Research with Behavioral and Social Sciences

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One of the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) leading initiatives is the Roadmap for Medical Research, which is designed to promote trans-NIH research. In an era of tightening budgets, the Roadmap is one of the more conspicuous areas of growth. In fiscal year 2006, the budget for Roadmap was 1.2 percent (\$329 million, out of \$28.2 billion) of the entire NIH budget but funding over the next few years could reach as high as 10 percent.

In fiscal years 2004 and 2005, the Roadmap initiative issued 38 solicitations, which funded 379 new grants. The grants are managed by the Office of Portfolio Analysis and Strategic Initiatives (OPASI), which will become more instrumental as trans-NIH research expands, particularly with respect to evaluating the efficiency and impact of such research.

One of the Roadmap's aims is to stimulate collaboration by supporting interdisciplinary research (which means that researchers work jointly, but from distinct disciplines). In this way, behavioral and social scientists have much to contribute to an integrative perspective on how to improve the Nation's health. The prevention and treatment of many current health problems, from obesity to drug abuse, have benefited from behavioral research, but we need refined methodologies to continue addressing the complexity of these issues. When multiple factors contributing to a health problem converge, it often becomes difficult to tease apart the true causes. This complexity is further deepened by the changing relationships of these factors over time.

To address this need, NIH has released a new Request for Application (RFA) as part of the Roadmap, entitled, "Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research via Methodological and Technological Innovation in the Behavioral and Social Sciences." This RFA aims to "advance the understanding of health through the development of new and innovative methodologies and technologies to support the interdisciplinary integration of social and/or behavioral scientific disciplines with other disciplines." The program encourages proposals that integrate across various levels of analysis — from the genomic to the global level — so that a true interdisciplinary picture emerges. It's important to keep in mind that the term "methodology" in this context encompasses a broad range of tools, including analytic approaches, research design, as well as measures.

"The RFA came about from an identified need for better research methodologies and technologies to address the complexity of today's public health challenges," said Dr. Patty Mabry, one of the two co-administrators of the RFA.

The initiative recognizes that "merging scientific insights and technologies gleaned from behavioral and social sciences with approaches from other scientific disciplines offers the promise of further advancing the public health mission of NIH."

Dr. Mabry and the other architects of the RFA hope the grants will lead to “new and improved research tools for behavioral and social scientists so that they can better address the complex research questions they face and make bigger and better contributions on interdisciplinary research teams.”

For fiscal year 2007, \$3 million has been committed for this program, and approximately 10 grants are expected to be awarded. Interdisciplinary teams that apply must include behavioral and/or social scientists in addition to scientists from other discipline(s). The program will be administered by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (Lisa Onken, Chief of the Behavioral Treatment Branch within the Division of Clinical Neuroscience and Behavioral Research at NIDA, is a Co-Chair), as well as the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (Patty Mabry, Health Scientist Administrator at OBSSR, is the other Co-Chair).

The deadline for letters of intent is January 23, 2007, and the deadline for applications is February 23, 2007. Questions should be address to Dr. Mabry at; mabryp@od.nih.gov, 301-402-1753, and Dr. Onken at: Lisa_Onken@nih.gov, 301-443-2235.

More information can be found at: <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/rfa-files/RFA-RM-07-004.htm>. A set of answers to Frequently Asked Questions regarding the preparation of applications in response to the RFA will be posted to a public website: http://nihroadmap.nih.gov/interdisciplinary/RFA-RM-07-004_faq.asp. All applicants are encouraged to review the FAQ's prior to submitting their application.