

Young Scientists Get Quick B/Start at NIDA

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The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) has awarded the first round of grants under its new Behavioral Science Track Award for Rapid Transition (*B/START*) initiative. This \$500,000 small grants program is designed specifically to help young behavioral scientists enter the competitive world of research grant-seeking. The specific goals of NIDA's *B/START* are to reverse the decline in young behavioral science investigators and to attract new investigators to the field of drug abuse research.

Difficult Transition

Under NIDA's *B/START*, grantees receive \$50,000 and indirect costs (using the NIH R03 mechanism) to conduct research on behavioral aspects and mechanisms of drug abuse and addiction.

Applications, limited to a mere ten pages, go through an expedited review process (three-month turnaround from submission to funding). These grants will allow new investigators to develop the pilot data they need to compete for regular research grants at the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

As NIDA Director and psychologist Alan Leshner describes it, "*B/START* was implemented to provide the necessary seed money for preliminary behavioral and cognitive data to be gathered." Leshner adds that "the *B/START* program has enabled NIDA to fill a very important gap in a research scientist's career. Young scientists can get started on their research programs, while the drug abuse field gains by ensuring that the next generation of talented behavioral scientists are supported."

B/START is just one of several new initiatives undertaken by NIDA's relatively new Behavioral Sciences Research Branch. This expansion is being directed by prominent behavioral researcher Jaylan Turkkan, chief of the Branch and formerly of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

Speaking to the program's mission, Turkkan described the typical dilemma of young investigators with thin research portfolios: "I'm sure we all remember that funny period between the time that postdoctoral training is finished, but preliminary studies have not yet been done to justify a 'prime-time' ROI (the standard NIH research grant application mechanism) or even an R29 (FIRST award for young researchers). For beginning investigators, this is a critical time to begin collecting pilot data to see if their ideas pan out for a larger, more comprehensive grant."

Expanded Horizon of Research Areas

What's more, Turkkan pointed out, the behavioral science horizon in drug abuse and addiction is more expansive than some might think. "With *B/START* support," she said, "young behavioral science researchers can begin asking questions about, for example, cognitive and decision factors leading to drug use or relapse; the situational cues that might elicit a smoking episode; or whether in animals, prior exposure to drugs leads to a greater vulnerability to both licit and illicit substances."

“In fact,” she added, “those not currently engaged in drug abuse research may be surprised to hear the wide range of behavioral research that NIDA supports, and about other mentored grant mechanisms that can support a career in drug abuse research in addition to the *B/START*. ”

Flowing from APS efforts to encourage federal research grant agencies to seriously consider the importance of programs to groom the next generation of scientists (see the August 23, 1996, issue of *Science*, for APS Director [Alan Kraut's editorial column](#) on research training), NIDA's *B/START* is modeled after a similar program at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) (see January 1995 *Observer*). *B/START* was initiated with these nudges from APS and from Congress in response to a pipeline issue, specifically, the documented decline in the number of young behavioral science investigators. *B/START*'s impetus was largely a response to the 1988 findings by the then Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration on the loss of young investigators (see May 1992 *Observer*).

“*B/START* is just the kind of program that we need more of,” said Kraut. “And we are working to ensure that other agencies follow the lead of NIMH and NIDA to help the next generation of scientists make the transition into productive research careers.”

B/START Class Facts of 1996 The NIDA *B/START* awards for 1996 were selected from a pool of 29 reviewed applications, making the success rate nearly 28 percent. Both the researchers and the research are diverse. Four of the principal investigators are women. One study is AIDS-focused and seven are human studies. Details on the awards are on the next page in the accompanying box.