

New Report Finds “Gaps and Variation” in Behavioral Science at NIH

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A new National Institutes of Health (NIH) report emphasizes the importance of behavioral science in improving health, observes that support for these sciences at NIH is unevenly distributed, and makes recommendations for how to improve their support at the agency. APS had called for the report in conversations with policymakers as an important step toward growing behavioral science’s role at NIH.

“This important report is an outcome of APS’s ongoing advocacy for psychological science and psychological scientists,” said Robert Gropp, APS Chief Executive Officer.

[“Integration of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research at the National Institutes of Health,”](#) released May 19 by an NIH oversight and advisory body, represents several years of work by a committee of behavioral and social scientists in response to a Congressional directive. As directed, the new report provides recommendations on how NIH can better integrate and realize the benefits to overall health that behavioral research can provide. Encouragement for this report arose from a shared sense, emphasized in conversations between APS and Congressional offices in 2020, that behavioral and social science research is underrepresented and under-resourced at NIH given the important connections behavioral

and social factors have with human health and disease.

The report agrees, confirming that behavioral and social sciences are crucial to public and individual health across a variety of domains. Concerningly, the report also notes that despite the relevance of behavioral and social sciences across the missions of NIH's different institutes and centers, there are significant "gaps and variation" in the integration of these sciences across NIH. Some NIH institutes, the report concludes, have little integration in some or all of the metrics examined.

In a May 19 letter to the study coauthors on behalf of APS, Gropp praised the thoroughness of the study but expressed concerns at its conclusions.

"The report's conclusions align with APS's view that NIH must grow its investments in behavioral and social science research," wrote Gropp. "Systemic underinvestment in the behavioral and social sciences ensures that the nation will fail in efforts to combat behavior-related health conditions."

[Read the APS letter to the study coauthors by clicking here.](#)

Among the report's recommendations to improve integration of behavioral and social sciences research at NIH:

- Ensure that behavioral and social sciences research is included and linked in NIH strategic planning, missions, and priorities.
- Evaluate and monitor the distribution of behavioral science staff across each institute, and address gaps.
- Include on NIH advisory councils a minimum of two members from behavioral and social sciences or public health, which current NIH policy requires.
- Include behavioral and social science research experts on grant review panels.
- Establish new research centers, resource grants, and trial networks that include behavioral and social sciences research.
- Increase resources for NIH's Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research.

Now that these expert recommendations have been established, APS's next step is to work with NIH, policymakers, members of the behavioral and social sciences, and the broader scientific community to urge their swift consideration and uptake. As a first step, APS has also written to the acting NIH director, Lawrence Tabak, reinforcing the importance of rapidly implementing the recommendations.

"These findings mean that NIH is neither generating the full scope of knowledge of living systems nor fully applying that knowledge to enhance health, lengthen life, or reduce disease," wrote APS in a May 20 letter, referring to NIH's mission.

[Read the APS letter to NIH Acting Director Lawrence Tabak.](#)

Over the coming months, stay tuned to www.psychologicalscience.org to learn more about APS's ongoing advocacy to ensure that behavioral and social sciences are represented and integrated within NIH and positioned to advance science and improve health outcomes.

[Read “Integration of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research at the National Institutes of Health.”](#)