



THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF
IMMUNOLOGISTS

**Submission by The American Association of Immunologists
to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) Request for Information (RFI):
Seeking Stakeholder Input on Enhancing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility
Across NIAID Extramural Activities**

May 30, 2023

The American Association of Immunologists (AAI), the nation's largest professional association of research scientists and physicians who are dedicated to understanding the immune system through basic, translational, and clinical research, appreciates this opportunity to submit comments to the NIAID [“Request for Information: Seeking Stakeholder Input on Enhancing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Across NIAID Extramural Activities.”](#) AAI supports the effort by NIAID to strengthen diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) activities with the goal of fostering a talented and diverse workforce and improving research and health outcomes.

AAI recognizes the significance of DEIA in all aspects of biomedical research and the opportunity for NIAID to serve as a model for other NIH institutes and centers, while also leveraging strategies from NIH DEIA efforts, including the [“NIH-Wide Strategic Plan for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility.”](#) While progress has been made, significant deficits remain and should be addressed to ensure a thriving and diverse biomedical workforce, reduce health disparities, and promote equity and inclusion across NIH activities. AAI appreciates the opportunity to further comment on the topics listed below.

NIAID Research Areas

AAI urges NIAID to encourage the conduct of research across diverse patient profiles for common and rare, acute and chronic illnesses to ensure that all patients are represented. Patients from communities of color, in particular, often suffer from missed diagnoses, misdiagnoses, or delays in diagnoses due to a lack of understanding of how certain diseases manifest clinically or impact their health outcomes; an example is not having representative images of dermatological conditions on all skin types in medical textbooks can result in deficits in medical provider knowledge and therefore inadequate patient care.

AAI also suggests that NIAID consider the following:

- the value of community-based research in advancing the study of disease pathophysiology
- including social determinants of health as factors in NIAID activities and in new initiatives
- the admixture of racial or ethnic groups when supporting race and/or ethnicity-based research or commenting on generalizability of race/ethnicity-based results with this in mind
- the use of ancestry (or genetic information) rather than self-reported racial or ethnic information

NIAID Organizational Practices

An example of a significant barrier to receiving funding is that study sections may dismiss applications because study populations are not representative of the U.S. AAI believes that it is critical to scientific discovery, however, for the sample population to reflect the endemic rates of a disease. There should be an obligation to justify the sample population and explain if the research will serve diverse patient profiles or specific communities.

When it comes to funding decisions, AAI believes that it is important to evaluate the strengths and/or capabilities of an individual or institution in DEIA efforts; for example, if they have demonstrated consistent access to diverse patient groups, trusted relationships with marginalized communities, or specific skills that will enrich research outcomes, rather than relying too heavily on an applicant's publication record, institutional affiliation, reputation, etc.

Extramural Scientific Workforce Diversity

AAI believes that individuals from all backgrounds should be encouraged to conduct research on health disparities and diseases that disproportionately impact communities of color, and to utilize community-based research, all of which will highlight the interconnectedness of our society. We also propose to change the paradigm that research is only impactful if it applies to all communities, instead stressing that proposals focused on specific communities can be especially impactful if they address gaps in knowledge. During peer review, study section members may penalize proposals focused on select groups for lack of impact, which then reduces funding to address the health needs of communities most likely to be underrepresented in research or facing worse health outcomes.

AAI recognizes that extramural scientific workforce diversity is negatively affected by disparities in research funding awarded to investigators. AAI encourages NIAID to consider additional ways to assess and enhance the success rate of research-focused awards obtained by underrepresented minority scientists and scientists of color to increase the diversity of the workforce pipeline. This could include creating novel strategies to increase the number of investigators from or working in communities of color who successfully receive R01 funding, such as creating Requests for Applications and study sections dedicated to investigators from institutions with low R01 funding with strong relationships in communities of color, and participating in the Research With Activities Related to Diversity (ReWARD) Program, which provides support for scientists conducting health-related research and who make significant contributions to DEIA. NIAID should also consider specifically soliciting proposals from Research Centers in Minority Institutions (RCMI), which could provide added confidence to new investigators who might otherwise leave the biomedical workforce. In addition, NIH and NIAID must address an uneven playing field during peer review. Increasing the diversity within study sections, for example by recruiting members from RCMI and similar institutions, may lessen bias present in some study sections.

Mentorship

AAI reinforces the need to foster mentorship relationships to help advance a diverse biomedical research workforce. AAI encourages NIAID to implement strategies that enable trainees and early-stage investigators of all demographics to effectively partner with established investigators who can provide meaningful mentorship and advice on how to advance their research programs and careers, including training on how to obtain consequential funding. For example, NIAID should explore providing more opportunities for Multiple Program Director/Principal Investigator (MPI) awards that require providing

mentorship to less senior investigators. This may include incentivizing senior investigators to consider applying for MPI awards, for example by crediting their effort under criteria for diversity advancement for training grants, center grants, or other similar funding.

In addition, with an increasing number of federal funding programs utilizing contracts rather than grants and seeking outcomes focused on a product (e.g., device, drug, diagnostic) rather than on publications, AAI believes there is greater need for adequate training on how to obtain federal funding through all mechanisms, including contracts. Incorporating such training will help attract, retain, and foster diversity among researchers at every career stage and prepare trainees for scientific careers in research areas that will advance NIAID priorities.