A Response to the NIH RFI " Sustaining the Biomedical Workforce and a Potential Emeritus Award for Senior Researchers"

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Abstract

This document contains my comments to the National Institutes of Health Request for Information on "Sustaining the Biomedical Workforce and a Potential Emeritus Award for Senior Researchers", as submitted on March 6th 2015. I also discuss some of the recent news surrounding the RFI, including the low rate of response to the RFI, and attempts to increase response and open discourse on the topics by publishing responses openly.

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SCIENCE AND SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

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The NIH issued a Request for Information (NOT-OD-15-064) (NIH, 2015a) looking for responses by March 6th on a proposal for an “emeritus award” allowing senior investigators to transition out of running a lab and perhaps pass the projects to a junior investigator. Citing calls from the community for such an award (FASEB, 2015), Sally Rockey’s “Rock Talk” blog post, “Seeking Your Input on Sustaining the Workforce Through an Emeritus Award” (Rockey, 2015) provided a forum for discussion, with further analysis in other venues (Berg, 2015a; Drugmonkey, 2015).

The proposal received press coverage at the time in Nature (Deng, 2015), and subsequently in an article on “The Retirement Debate” (Scudellari, 2015) where the “emeritus award” was described as having “met with overwhelming disapproval”. Or was it? Jeremy Berg subsequently submitted a Freedom of Information Act request for the response to the RFI on the “emeritus” award (Berg, 2015b), after rumors circulated that the response was more positive than what was publicly perceived. Responses were received from only 195 individuals, and 3 scientific societies; less than 200 entities in all of the U.S. biomedical research system (Berg, 2015c). Berg has provided some preliminary analysis (Berg, 2015c) from the primary data (with names, but not institutions, redacted (Berg, 2105d); direct link to the data here), as well as the observation that an “emeritus” award renamed as a “Capstone” award has been included in a reading of the 21st Century Cures Act, currently under discussion in the U.S. Congress (Berg, 2015d).

Jessica Polka at Harvard Medical School and I previously published a call for the voice of early-career researchers (McDowell and Polka, 2015) based on aspirations of this community to have a greater voice in these debates (McDowell et al., 2014). Discouraged by the low response rate, others and we

decided to openly publish our responses to the most recent NIH RFI, NOT-OD-15-084, “Optimizing Funding Policies and Other Strategies to Improve the Impact and Sustainability of Biomedical Research.” (NIH, 2015b; responses can be found here (FOR, 2015; Pai, 2015; Polka, 2015; Kryazhimskiy, 2015; McDowell, 2015). At the time of writing, comments can still be submitted by the end of May 17th on the web at http://grants.nih.gov/grants/rfi/rfi.cfm?ID=42. It has been our hope that openly publishing comments will inspire our colleagues to answer calls to submit responses and make their voices heard (Berg, 2015e; FOR, 2015; McDowell and Polka, 2015). I have already been contacted by a scientific society, thanking me for my comments and that they have been incorporated into a direct letter from that society to John Lorsch, head of the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS). Therefore I feel it is important to not only submit responses, but make them publicly available for criticism and discussion by others.

In a similar vein, I have chosen to remove my anonymity in the spirit of open discourse on the “emeritus” award: below are the comments I submitted to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Request for Information (RFI) NOT-OD-15-064, “Sustaining the Biomedical Workforce and a Potential Emeritus Award for Senior Researchers.”

COMMENT 1

Community interest in an emeritus award that allows a senior investigator to transition out of a role or position that relies on funding from NIH research grants. Little to no community interest in such a mechanism exists, from what I have seen. An R01 can already be moved over to another investigator, and senior investigators are recognized quite uniformly as being the last group in the biomedical research system that requires extra funding mechanisms.

COMMENT 2

Ideas for how one would utilize an emeritus award (e.g., to facilitate laboratory closure; to promote partnership between a senior and junior investigator; to provide opportunities for acquiring skills needed for transitioning to a new role).

The award could be used for mentoring junior faculty and pairing a junior, perhaps pre-tenure track professor with a retiring investigator to provide mentorship and pass on lab infrastructure. However I strongly feel that such an award is not the priority of the NIH in the first place.

COMMENT 3

Suggestions for the specific characteristics for an emeritus award (e.g., number of years of support; definition of a junior faculty partner).

The junior faculty should be the principal investigator on the award and should be essential and central to the administration of such an award. However I strongly feel that such an award is not the priority of the NIH in the first place.

COMMENT 4

Ways in which NIH could incentivize the use of an emeritus award, from the perspectives of both senior investigators and institutions.

I do not think senior investigators nor institutions are in need of more incentives for more awards. I strongly feel that such an award is not the priority of the NIH in the first place.

COMMENT 5

Impediments to the participation in such an award program, from the perspectives of both senior investigators and institutions.

There are no impediments to senior investigators and institutions other than the ill-feeling this will breed with junior faculty and early career researchers in what is already a polarized debate.

COMMENT 6

Any additional comments you would like to offer to NIH on this topic.

I have included comments from an opinion piece that I coauthored on this discussion (https://thewinnower.com/papers/acallforthevoicesofearlycareerresearchers): "Perhaps the most telling part of the Request for Information is that public comment

is sought for “Impediments to the participation in such an award program, from the perspectives of both senior investigators and institutions.” The fact that there is no mention of junior investigators, and that this is a proposal that NIH has chosen to focus on most urgently, is concerning. There is much anger within the community at the thought that money for R01s (the principal major grant funding mechanism in the NIH) could be lost to increase funding specifically for senior investigators; an argument could be made that these are the last people who need additional funding. In particular, there has been some comment that it is already possible to transfer an R01 grant to another person, so this mechanism may, in effect, already exist. In our opinion, the NIH needs to make a compelling argument for why this mechanism is needed. How will this benefit the members of the emeritus awardee’s lab, or the junior investigator potentially receiving the lab after the transition? Is the goal to encourage earlier retirement by specifying a hard deadline for retirement after receiving the award? Is the goal to ease the transition out of the lab for the postdocs

and grad students that need to find new labs? We believe there is also an implication that junior investigators require the benevolent passing of project ideas from more senior investigators, rather than having their own independent projects, and indeed a recent report by Ewan Callaway in Nature has highlighted that, in fact, younger investigators may be considered more innovative than senior researchers, by some metrics (Callaway 2015). Some comments on the Rock Talk blog suggest that making the project focused on the junior faculty by giving them full control over the budget could ameliorate the concern; the senior investigator could be involved with the goal of transferring equipment and of course collaborative expertise. On the other hand, it is encouraging to see the NIH thinking of creative funding mechanisms rather than a reliance purely on the R01-like mechanisms. Discussions are needed on the various ways of making use of talent in science in particular with a system that has a much higher number of “trainees” than permanent academic positions for them to eventually take. In particular, the discussion of methods to share resources and people across lab boundaries is likely to encourage greater collaboration. But if the NIH truly wants to make the best use of the current pool of scientific talent, then we believe that such awards as this, which will only affect a very small portion of the talent pool, should not be their major focus and instead they should look at mechanisms to prevent talented scientists from being forced out of academia at the ECR and junior faculty levels. The NIH certainly can’t be faulted for provoking debate. The only ones at fault will be those who don’t take the opportunity to comment. This is not the only means of taking action to change the biomedical research system; we cannot allow anyone to think “no news is good news.” If ECRs aren’t contributing to the ongoing conversations and making their concerns heard, it is much harder to make progress. In the hope that this has provoked some debate and dialogue, we encourage you to take the opportunity to comment on these proposals."

DISCLAIMER

This article reflects the authors’ personal opinions and not that of Tufts University.

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