NIGMS Issues Challenge / Seeks Input on Proposed New Grant Program

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Two requests from the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) give social and behavioral scientists the opportunity to provide input:

1. To highlight discoveries and breakthroughs that have been enabled by funding from the Institute, and
2. Respond to its time-sensitive Request for Information (RFI) to assist the Institute in its planning for a potential new program tentatively called Maximizing Investigators’ Research Award (MIRA).

NIH Issues Challenge to Find Advances Tied to NIGMS Support

NIGMS is seeking the public’s help in capturing the Institute’s progress toward its strategic goal: “to advance awareness and understanding of the basic biomedical research enterprise, including its value, requirements, and potential

impact.” The Institute has issued a challenge to the scientific community with the goal of identifying past advances that are serving (or have served) to improve human health and well-being. It excludes ongoing studies that may, in the future, have a major impact.

NIGMS intends to use the examples to help inform the historical context of scientific breakthroughs and the Institute’s role in supporting them. The examples will supplement NIGMS’ ongoing efforts to link advances in human health and well-being to taxpayer-supported basic research and to stimulate further innovation by explaining the value and the impact of basic research on human health.

Submissions are expected to be a written document that describes the basic research and how it directly led to improvements in human health, well-being, or other tangible benefits to the public; NIGMS support must have played a major/critical role in one or more of the underlying discoveries. A history of continuous or exclusive NIGMS support is not required.

The focus of the submission must fall into one or both of the following categories:

1. Major advances funded by NIGMS that have led to improvements in human health, well-being, or other tangible benefits to the public.
2. Applications in medicine, industry, technology, or elsewhere that have their roots in NIGMS-funded research projects. Examples include commonly used diagnostics, therapeutics, devices, or technologies used in medical, industrial, agricultural, or other fields.

NIGMS plans to select up to ten winners, who will receive $500 prizes and recognition on the NIGMS website. Submissions are due by Monday, October 20, 2014. For additional requirements, judging criteria, FAQs, and other information, see NIGMS’ website.
Request For Information: Maximizing Investigators’ Research Award (MIRA)

NIGMS also recently issued a time-sensitive Request for Information (RFI) for input to assist it in its planning for a potential new program tentatively called Maximizing Investigators’ Research Award (MIRA). According to the Institute, MIRA is intended to be a grant in support of all of the research supported by NIGMS in an investigator’s laboratory. The Institute is planning to issue a Funding Opportunity Announcement to test the new program on a pilot scale. Accordingly, it is seeking feedback from the scientific community.

According to the RFI, the Institute is attempting to address the consequences of its funding mechanisms, including efficiency and efficacy, associated with providing basic research support to individual investigators via a pilot program to fund investigators’ overall research programs. The hope is that the new mechanism will:

- Increase the stability of funding for NIGMS-supported investigators, which could enhance their ability to take on ambitious scientific projects and approach problems creatively.
- Increase flexibility for investigators to follow important new research directions as opportunities arise, rather than being bound to specific aims proposed in advance of the studies.
- Improve the distribution of funding among the nation’s highly talented and promising investigators to increase overall scientific productivity and the chances for important breakthroughs.
- Reduce the time spent by researchers writing and reviewing grant applications, in the long term.

NIGMS director Jon Lorsch noted in a recent post on the NIGMS Feedback Loop Blog that "it’s important to note that MIRAs are not intended to be a method for supporting only a perceived elite group of investigators or promoting only high-risk, high-potential-reward research. Our intent is to pilot a program that might transform how we support fundamental
biomedical research, creating a more productive, efficient and sustainable enterprise."

The proposed award would provide support for a lab’s research program. Supported researchers would have the freedom to explore new avenues of inquiry that arise during the course of their work as long as it is related to NIGMS’ mission and does not require additional review for regulatory compliance. The award would be renewable with funding ranging from $150,000 to $750,000 in direct costs per year, depending on recommendations of the study section and the NIGMS Council as well as staff evaluation of the needs and expected productivity and impact of the program. MIRA would also take into consideration the support the investigator receives from other sources in deciding funding levels for the award. Up to $150,000 in administrative supplement support for the purchase of equipment would be allowable per grant cycle. The median direct costs for MIRAs would be higher than the current median investigator-initiated (R01) award direct cost at the Institute. The award would be for five years, a year longer than the current average for a NIGMS R01. The Program Director/Principal Investigator (PD/PI) would be expected to commit at least 50 percent research effort.

According to the RFI, review of the application would emphasize a holistic evaluation of the investigator’s track record and the overall potential importance of the proposed research program, without focusing on specific project details. Specific aims would not be required. The process would include peer review using existing criteria and processes but would be tailored to address the particular features of the MIRA.

Reviewers for the award would be asked to address additional factors in addition to the standard review criteria. The RFI includes a possible implementation plan that includes two paths. (1) In lieu of a competitive renewal, PDs/Pis who currently have two or more NIGMS R01s could apply. The budget would be higher than that for any of the individual awards the investigator has, but usually less than the total of all of their NIGMS support. (2) The program would be open to Early Stage Investigators (ESIs), bringing cadre of
ESIs into the system who would be directly compared to other NIH-supported ESIs funded through traditional mechanisms. MIRA would be considered a substantial, independent NIH research award that disqualifies an individual from being classified as an ESI.

The Institute invites comments on four specific topics, but comments are not limited to these topics:

1. The merits of this funding program for established and early stage investigators.
2. The likelihood that established and early stage investigators would apply.
3. Concerns about the proposal.
4. Suggestions for changes to improve the proposal or associated processes.

Comments must be submitted to https://www.research.net/s/NewGrantProgram_gov, by August 15, 2014. Additional information is available here.

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