FASEB
Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology

Representing Over 130,000 Researchers

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FASEB comments in response to NOT-OD-20-064, "Request for Information (RFI) on the FY 2021-2025 National Institutes of Health (NIH)-Wide Strategic Plan Framework"

Comments submitted electronically via online Comment Form on March 26, 2020

Cross-Cutting Themes articulated in the framework, and/or additional cross-cutting themes that may be considered.

The proposed cross-cutting themes highlight areas of critical importance for an agency charged with seeking fundamental knowledge about living systems and applying it to the enhancement of human health and wellness. Specifically, FASEB appreciates NIH's continued emphasis on increasing, enhancing, and supporting diversity, both through more inclusive research activities as well as development of a scientific workforce representative of the nation's broader population. We are also pleased by the emphasis on data science and the development of technologies and tools, as both are critical to advancing scientific progress. Technological advances have expanded the ways investigators collect, utilize and share data, and federal agencies such as NIH play an important role in establishing expectations for data curation, management, and sharing.

NIH's priorities across the three Objectives articulated in the framework, including potential benefits, drawbacks or challenges, and other priority areas for consideration.

FASEB supports the overall framework proposed for the FY 2021 – 2025 NIH-wide strategic plan. The proposed framework builds upon the lessons learned during the development of the current (FY 2016 – 2020) agency-wide strategic plan and offers flexibility by emphasizing overarching NIH priorities rather than delineating Institute or Center (I/C) specific projects or programming. We also appreciate NIH's continued active engagement of the research community in the discussion of planned priorities for the next five years and beyond.

We are pleased with the emphasis on NIH's role in driving foundational science within Objective 1, Advancing Biomedical and Behavioral Sciences. NIH's continued support of investigator-initiated research has accelerated scientists' understanding of the biological processes underlying debilitating diseases and uncovered strategies for treatments and cures. Foundational research efforts supported by NIH are critical for guiding the development of clinical applications to prevent disease and enhance public health. Therefore, as content for this objective is developed, we urge inclusion of key examples of findings from foundational research studies that have contributed to clinical advances. Similarly, it is important to highlight NIH's role as a key sponsor of foundational research efforts. While private sector investments can aid in furthering the translation of preliminary findings, they cannot replace robust, predictable, and sustainable federal support for exploratory research.

FASEB appreciates NIH's recognition of the importance of research resources and workforce development outlined in Objective 2, Developing, Maintaining, and Renewing Scientific Research Capacity. During the past decade, Working Groups of the Advisory Committee to the Director issued numerous reports highlighting challenges facing the biomedical research workforce. While we appreciate the increased transparency and discussion of challenges faced by Early-Stage and Midcareer Investigators, the biomedical research workforce pipeline remains unstable and fragile. Therefore, we welcome inclusion of goals that take meaningful steps towards addressing the diversity and sustainability of the U.S. biomedical research workforce.

NIH support of research infrastructure, including centralized repositories and centers and technology development, complements investments towards individual research teams. Strategies that synergize staff talent, reduce duplicative services, improve user access, and increase overall capacity of the biomedical research enterprise maximize infrastructure investments. Expanded support for regional instrumentation centers with additional technological capabilities such as single-cell sequencing, spectral cytometry, and large animal transgenics represent investments that will drive innovation forward and facilitate scientific collaboration, consistent with the Strategic Plan's cross-cutting themes.

The focus of Objective 3 – Exemplifying and Promoting the Highest Level of Scientific Integrity, Public Accountability, and Social Responsibility in the Conduct of Science – is appreciated given the sustained interest among lawmakers on the rigor and transparency of federally funded research. NIH is committed to fostering scientific research and dialog of the highest quality. This objective provides opportunities to highlight the impact of agency policies and practices – many put in place prior to the adoption of the current strategic plan – to furthering this goal. In addition, we encourage continued emphasis and commitment to the elimination of harassment in research environments including the laboratory and home institution as well as field work and scientific conferences.

Future opportunities or emerging trans-NIH needs.
Development of the FY 2021 – 2025 NIH Strategic Plan corresponds with a unique time as research stakeholders navigate uncharted territory amidst the COVID-19 crisis. In light of these current challenging circumstances, we encourage inclusion of language regarding rapid mobilization of NIH resources to respond proactively to this and future pandemics.