September 7, 2007

Norka Ruiz Bravo, Ph.D.
Deputy Director for Extramural Research
National Institutes of Health
Building 1, Room 144
Bethesda, Maryland 20892

Dear Dr. Bravo:

On behalf of the members of the Population Association of America (PAA) and Association of Population Centers (APC), we are writing to share comments PAA and APC recently sent to NIH in response to Request for Information (RFI): NIH System to Support Biomedical and Behavioral Research and Peer Review, #NOT-OD-07-084. Given the significance of this exercise and the implications any changes to the current peer review system could have for PAA/APC members who depend on NIH support, we want to ensure our comments are received.

The Population Association of America (PAA) (www.popassoc.org) is a professional organization of over 3,000 individual members who conduct research on the health and socioeconomic implications of population change. PAA members include demographers, sociologists, economists, health scientists, and statisticians. The Association of Population Centers (APC) (www.popcenters.org) is an organization comprised of over 30 universities and research groups nationwide whose mission includes fostering collaborative demographic research and data sharing and translating basic population research for policy makers.

We hope our comments help to inform this ambitious undertaking. Please do not hesitate to contact PAA/APC Public Affairs Specialist, Mary Jo Hoeksema, if we can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Barbara Entwisle, Ph.D.  Michael White, Ph.D.
President  President
Population Association of America  Association of Population Centers

cc: Dr. Toni Scarpa, Director, NIH Center for Scientific Review
PAA/APC response to NIH RFI (#NOT-OD-07-084) on Peer Review

1) Challenges of NIH System of Research Support
   - The ratio of awards to meritorious applications is too low. Long-term funding increases are needed to address this critical problem. Given tight paylines, it’s hard for scientists, particularly junior investigators, to compete in the current environment.

   - NIH should give particular attention to funding mechanisms most accessible to junior investigators, including post-doctoral fellowship awards (F series), career development awards (K series), and small grants (especially the R03’s). NIH should consider expanding the K99 mechanism after it has had time to be evaluated. It is important to offer a diverse array of mechanisms to support a wide variety of potential career paths.

   - Post-doctoral support mechanisms need more flexibility so that some applicants can balance teaching and research responsibilities in research settings where some teaching is required or contributes to their career growth.

   - NH should increase awareness of funding mechanisms—especially among behavioral and social scientists. The current mechanisms favor scientists from traditional biomedical research fields.

2) Challenges of NIH Peer Review Process
   - Ensuring that the composition of study sections is sufficiently diverse to review complex, interdisciplinary research applications.

   - Reviewers don’t always understand the objective of the various funding mechanisms.

   - Attracting more senior scientists to review.

3) Solutions to Challenges
   - Study sections with diverse interdisciplinary composition need ways of building strong working relationships. Off-site reviews conducted via secure chat rooms, for example, do not help to achieve this objective. We want to underscore the importance and value of face-to-face communications for building strong working relationships within study sections.

   - NIH should continue to invest in a rigorous application triage process and to provide reviewers with written reviews several days prior to meeting. By doing so, study sections will function more efficiently.

   - When considering possible technologies to assist the study sections, consider how well these changes may serve the different cultures of the study sections and might affect the task of integrating the review judgments of scientists from diverse disciplines.
• To recruit more senior scientists, promote strategies that increase the likelihood of single-day study section meetings and allowing flexible submission deadlines for those who participate.

• Do not reduce the size of review panels to save money if the scientific rigor of reviews, in particular interdisciplinary reviews, would be compromised.

• Compromising the quality of review in other ways for the sake of saving money, is penny wise and pound-foolish.

4) Core Values of NIH Peer Review Process
   • We affirm the core value of the existing peer review system.

   • We ask that CSR proceed cautiously with changes to the peer review system. Demographic research has been well served by a system with large, interdisciplinary review panels, detailed research applications and face-to-face reviewer interaction. The basic study section model needs to be reviewed periodically as fields evolve and emerge—particularly, if the agency wants to continue to support interdisciplinary research.

   • The system should encourage study sections to develop effective working relationships.

   • Study sections should have broad representation, reflecting the diversity of the sciences NIH supports.

5) Peer Review Criteria and Scoring
   • The basic criteria are good as is.

   • We underscore CSR’s decision to emphasize innovation as part of the review process.

6) Career Pathways
   • Refer to comments about junior investigators under item #1.