March 17, 2008

Penny Wung Burgoon, Ph.D.
Senior Assistant to the Deputy Director
Office of the Director, NIH
One Center Drive,
Building 1, Room 114
Bethesda, MD
20892-0183

Dear Dr. Burgoon:

On behalf of the over 3,000 members of the Population Association of America (PAA) and over 30 population research centers comprising the Association of Population Centers (APC), we wish to comment on the Final Draft of the NIH 2007-2008 Peer Review Self-Study.

We thank NIH for seeking input from the community throughout the course of this ambitious examination of the peer review process. In this vein, we hope NIH will continue to keep the behavioral, social, and biomedical research communities involved as it undertakes any reformations. As we stated in our initial comments, the NIH peer review system is very effective and does not need to be dramatically altered. We hope the agency will implement any changes incrementally via the use of pilot projects and ongoing assessments both inside and outside of the NIH.

In particular, we are pleased the report reflects many of the issues we raised in our comments (http://www.popassoc.org/files/public/LtrToNorkaBravo09-07.doc) regarding the importance of supporting early-career investigators and creating more incentives to attract senior investigators to participate as reviewers. In addition, we agree with idea of establishing a “Not Recommended for Resubmission” rating category as a way to provide applicants with unambiguous feedback.

Our greatest concern regarding the report is its continued call for electronically assisted reviews to expedite or facilitate the work of study sections. The cultures of study sections vary widely. Therefore, we believe technology may not serve the different cultures of the study sections uniformly and might affect the task of integrating the review judgments of scientists from diverse disciplines. Further, we are concerned the report advocates a shortened application. While we are pleased the report does not suggest a specific length, we do not think limiting the application will improve the overall quality of the review or simplify the review process for participants. As NIH contemplates final action on these issues, we respectively ask you to consider our perspectives.
Once again, thank you for involving the research community in this process and for considering all of our opinions as you evaluate the current peer review process and consider possible changes.

Sincerely,

Greg Duncan, Ph.D.  
President  
Population Association of America

Michael White, Ph.D.  
President  
Association of Population Centers