July 14, 2021

Noni Byrnes, PhD
Director
Center for Scientific Review
U.S. National Institutes of Health
6701 Rockledge Drive MSC 7768
Bethesda MD 20892-7768

Dear Dr. Byrnes:

For the last few months, the ASCB Public Policy Committee has conducted an anonymous survey of our members, asking about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic and associated shutdowns have had on them and their research. We are particularly concerned about the impact on their scientific productivity.

While it was obvious to us before we conducted our survey that the ability to do science had been difficult for most during pandemic, we wanted to know more about the depth of the impact. While not a statistically precise survey, our survey results indicate some not surprising but still very distressing news, both about the general impact of the pandemic and about its different effects on female scientists:

- 77% of those responding to the survey indicated that their lab has lost between 20% and 60% of research productivity since March 2020. Near half of all female PIs lost 40 – 60% whereas the same proportion of male PIs lost only 20-40%. Almost half of female trainees identified at least a 40% loss of productivity.
- The loss of productivity was especially acute when it came to those who run labs supported by federal grants, with almost 80% of senior investigators indicating a loss of 3 to 9 months of productivity. 80% of women and 76% of men expected to lose between 3 and 9 months of work on their federal research grants.
- Access to buildings and/or limitations on the number of people in labs at one time were the two leading factors for loss of productivity for both senior investigators and trainees. 84% of senior investigators identified personnel limits and 67% said closed or restricted facilities contributed to the loss of productivity.
- 72% of trainees indicated space restrictions and 62%...
cited closed facilities as reasons for productivity loss.

- Mental health issues were also a major factor, ranking as the third most significant factor for the loss of productivity. These were cited by 52% of senior investigators and 58% of trainees. 58% of female senior scientists cited mental health as an issue, as did almost 60% of both male and female trainees.
- 36% of senior scientists and 17% of trainees highlighted childcare as a leading concern with 5% more female trainees than male trainees citing it as an issue.
- A small number of investigators reported relatively minor impacts. 10% of senior investigators and 15% percent of trainees reported relatively minor impacts of COVID-19.

The biomedical research community retains hope for solutions in the form of additional funding. The ASCB strongly supports a significant one-time increase in NIH funding. The fact that almost 80% of PIs lost three to nine months of productivity on federal research grants, as revealed by our survey, suggests the need for such a funding bolus. However, a more pressing matter is to determine how the processes of distributing existing funding can take into account COVID-19 related impacts.

We think grantees and reviewers need clear guidance about the role research-related COVID-19 experiences should play in future grant applications. In particular, we would like to see greater clarity in instructing researchers and reviewers about how to address the following questions:

(i) How should investigators provide information about the impact of COVID-19 on their research?
(ii) Should panels consider COVID-19 impact on research?
(iii) How should this information inform the panel?

This is an area in which CSR already does and will continue to play a critical role.

As concerning as our data are, it is the personal stories from the survey that best describe the circumstances far too many NIH-funded investigators experienced.

- “My research is very hands on and can’t be done online, so my research stopped – no one in the lab”
- “The first 6 months were extremely rough due to lack of daycare. Now it is a bit better but the lack of social interactions affected the mental health of all my lab members, including me. I do not know how we will fix that. It will have long term negative consequences on my trainees.”
- “Overall, I am concerned that the long lasting effects will negatively influence my ability to secure funding to keep my lab doors open in the long run.”
- “Like many women with small children, COVID-related restrictions have been catastrophic. There is NO HELP! There is NO WAY that I can do the work I need to do! I am exhausted and my University claims to care and understand, but has DONE NOTHING to help. I can’t even bring my child to work with me when his school decides to cancel for a day because we continue to have high numbers of cases among our students. My level of frustration is ENORMOUS right now!!! My male colleagues are extremely productive. I’m barely surviving.”

The ASCB would be pleased to work with you and others at the NIH and CSR to share with our members any
guidance you have about what information grantees should include in grant applications and how study section members should consider that information. These are important times for our community and the ASCB stands ready to do all we can to help.

Sincerely,

Ruth Lehmann, PhD
ASCB President