September 16, 2021

Michael Lauer, MD  
NIH Deputy Director  
Office of Extramural Research  
U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH)  
9000 Rockville Pike  
Bethesda, Maryland 20892

Dear Dr. Lauer:

For the past 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 has 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 the pandemic, we wanted to know more about the depth of the impact. While not a statistically precise survey, our survey results indicate not surprising but still very distressing news, both about the general impact of the pandemic and about its specific effects on female scientists.

The most notable statistic is that almost 80% of PIs lost three to nine months of productivity on federal research grants. Some in the scientific community, including the ASCB, would like to see additional funding to address the loss of productivity. While we believe that an additional bolus of funding would be helpful, there are significant challenges to achieving this goal.

Thus, the most pressing matter from the perspective of the ASCB community is to determine how the processes of distributing existing funding can best take into account COVID-19 related impacts.

We think that both grantees and reviewers need clearer guidance about the role research-related COVID-19 experiences should play in future grant applications. We were pleased that OER recently
issued NOT-OD-21-180 clarifying guidance for applicants who are preparing grant applications during the current pandemic. However, the lack of information about how reviewers should take this information into account means that further clarification is necessary.

A separate concern is that those most in need may be hesitant to ask for help out of concern that asking for assistance will cast them and their research in a negative light. Moreover, since not everyone is aware of official notices, we believe that other communication methods are needed to ensure that the research community is aware of NIH’s strong interest in providing them with the assistance they need.

The need for clarity and expanded communication can be found in our survey results:

- 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.
- 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.

Some of those who replied to our survey told us they used some or all of the lockdown time to review and analyze data collected before the pandemic. This means that immediate grant application cycles may not show any loss of research productivity. It is very possible, therefore, that there will be a delay before the impact of the shutdown becomes apparent. We hope that OER is planning for a potential delay.

As concerning as the 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 OER to make sure grantees are aware of the help NIH is providing our community. These are important times for our community and the ASCB stands ready to do all we can to help.

Sincerely,

Holly Goodson
Chair, ASCB Public Policy Committee
University of Notre Dame