Support for Women in Biomedical Careers at NIH and Beyond

Transcript of recorded session at 2022-2023 NIH Grants Conference

Xenia T. Tigno, Ph.D.: Good afternoon, everybody, and thank you for coming to this session. My name is Xenia Tigno. I am the Associate Director for Careers at the Office of Research on Women's Health. For those of you who participated in the previous session, you heard that Dr. Agarwal discussed the landmark policy of the Office of Research on Women's Health on sex as a biological variable. So the ORWH is primarily concerned with research on the health of women, but apart from promoting research on women's health, part of the ORWH's mission also includes promoting the career advancement for women in biomedical careers. And my section, the careers section, is tasked with this responsibility, of achieving, for one thing, representation and gender equity in the scientific workforce with an aspiration that every woman scientist reach their full career potential. So we are always concerned with addressing barriers and promoting facilitators for women to be able to enter, re-enter, remain in, retrain in, retool and advance in their biomedical careers. So I am privileged at this time to introduce to you some of the initiatives that the ORWH careers section has made available in order to achieve these goals. Next slide, please. So the ORWH was established in 1990, and shortly after, the first funding opportunity announcement, which we call at the NIH a FOA, were the Re-Entry Supplements. It was shortly after that establishment when the office realized that there should be opportunities for scientists who have had an interruption in their careers, primarily due to family responsibilities, to be able to re-enter the workforce and re-establish their research careers. And that is the reason why the Re-entry Supplements Program was the very first among many that the ORWH put in place. So the Re-Entry Supplements provides a mentored-research training opportunity for a minimum of a year to scientists who have had at least a hiatus in their careers of 6 months due to family responsibilities, also due to their spouses relocating, for instance, due to a military deployment, et cetera, and give them the opportunity to come back to science. So the candidates for these Re-entry Supplements are usually already holders of doctoral degrees or equivalent. However, some of the NIH institutes and centers may allow some predoctoral students to also use these Re-entry Supplements, including those who are enrolled in dual-degree programs, for instance, MD-PhD students who had to leave for a while but would like to come back to a research career. The latest reissuance of these Re-entry Supplements was in 2022 last year, but they are called NOT, Notice NOT-OD-21-134, and included in this new reissuance is what we call the Re-Integration Program. The Re-Integration Program is different from the Re-entry Program in that it seeks to address a different kind of need, and that is the need of scientists who had to leave their current employment or laboratory, for instance, because of some kind of harassment, for instance, sexual harassment, gender harassment, racial and ethnic microaggressions, and they need to leave their present environment and transition to a new different environment which is more supportive, safer and more welcoming. So for these kinds of people, who need to leave their workplace but would still want to remain in science, we have the Re-Integration Program, and both pre- and postdoctoral students are eligible to apply. And this will allow them to transition from their current unsafe environment to a safer, supportive research environment. Just like the Re-entry Supplements, these are not stand-alones. You will always need to have a mentor who is willing to accept you or let you come into their labs so that you can pursue your training further. So the lab may not necessarily be in the same department or the same university. If we find a mentor in a different college or university, you are also able to tap into these supplements, provided the mentor has an NIH active award which can support supplements. Again, the ORWH provides some funds for these, and all of the ICs that are signed onto the supplements are also willing to fund or support additional predoc or postdoc mentees under one of their funded scientists. So for more information, please go to that https URL to see more about this program. The next one, please. So the BIRCWH program, which is actually the Building Interdisciplinary Research Careers in Women's Health, has been around for 22 years now. Again, it is one of ORWH's first and what we call signature programs. It was established by various institutes and centers of the NIH in 1999 to support junior faculty members as they transition towards independent research careers. So the BIRCWH program supports junior faculty and provides them funds to ensure that 75 percent of their time is protected so that they can engage in research, and pairs them with a mentor or a senior scholar so that their mentoring is also in place. So the reason that we say 75 percent is because many of our BIRCWH scholars are actually MDs, and they have clinical responsibilities. But if they receive this funding, then this ensures that the university or their department will provide them at least 75 percent of time to do their research, and the rest of the 25 percent they can pursue their clinical duties if need be, or if they are basic scientists, perhaps do some teaching on the side. So the BIRCWH program is really intended for junior faculty, meaning to say they are probably assistant professors or so, and so it is a partnership also with the institution that receives this BIRCWH program. It is a mentor-career-development award, what is known at the NIH as a K12 program, so it's not an individual K but an institutional K. And on our last analysis in 2021, many of the institutions have remained as BIRCWH institutions. Those who have been there for less than 5 years are 33 percent. Those between 10 and 15 years as BIRCWH institutions, they were about 41 percent, and more than 15 years, in fact, as mentioned, that BIRCWH has been around since 22 years ago, so 26 percent of those institutions have been BIRCWH institutions for more than 15 years. To date, over 750 scholars have been trained through the BIRCWH program, and we are happy to say that many have achieved independent research status and have successfully competed and obtained NIH research project grants. So the BIRCWH program spans across 42 institutions, 11 of which, as mentioned, have been with the BIRCWH for more than 15 years. So this is a highly visible program which has also caught the interest in the attention of Congress. If we proceed with the next slide, please. So last year towards the end of fiscal year 2022, Congress gifted the ORWH with additional funds in order to recruit more BIRCWH scholars into their sites. So right now, these scholars have been added to the 19 existing BIRCWH scholars, and the intent was to increase the diversity also of the scholars pool. But in addition to the ORWH having added additional scholars to the existing sites, there was also a new program that was instituted primarily for the BIRCWH scholars, and this is a collaboration between the ORWH and the National Institute of Drug Abuse, or the NIDA. And the purpose of this what we call BIRCWH Scholars Innovation Program was to provide training and mentorship in the critical area of substance-use disorders, for mental health and women's health. So this is primarily an add on for our BIRCWH scholars so that they can orient and learn more about or become aware of substance- abuse disorders and diseases. So it's a didactic series and an online experience focused on sex and gender differences and substance-abuse disorders and mental-health issues related to substance-use disorders throughout the life span. So it is a mentoring program which allows BIRCWH scholars to work with the Medical University of of South Carolina's SCORE program. So in a way, it is also a collaboration between the SCORE program that Dr. Agarwal had mentioned in the last hour with the BIRCWH program, and it will include visits to MUSC and to national meetings for networking and for fostering collaborations. So there is also an opportunity to have a mock review session, which is very important for K awardees in order for them to be able to submit competitive R01 applications. This particular program, as mentioned, is in collaboration with NIDA, so it is more related to issues related to substance-use disorders. The next slide, please. So this is aptly called to our individual K awardee, so not BIRCWH scholars who are K12 awardees, but those who have K01s, K25s, so individual K awards. So this Continuity and Retention Supplements, as we call them, seeks to address that critical juncture in a K awardee's career when they experience a life event, for instance pregnancy or adoption of a child, when they have to take some time off from work because of this life event. And we know that this is an important juncture because many women are unable to proceed with their project, their individual K awards, if they have to take maternity leave, for instance. However, in order for the K awardee to be able to continue their work and continue producing data so that they will be competitive for a future R award, these supplement grants provide you with additional funding over and above the K award that you receive from the outset. And this year, we have aptly reissued these K awardees as NOT-OD-23-032 and NOT-OD-23-032, which are for RPG or early R01 awardees. So these supplements provide up to 70,000 additional funds to enable you to pursue your research while going through the critical life events. You can either add additional research personnel or other programs or staff in order for you to be able to pursue your research while or immediately after your leave. So the reason that we have reissued it is because we saw that there was aptly a need, especially during the COVID pandemic, when a lot of our K awardees had to be caregivers either for their children, their spouses or even for their parents. And many of those who apply for these awards were able to get them in order for them to be able to further their careers while they were at home or taking care of their family. The new reissued NOSIs also has increased the eligibility to include serious personnel illness on the part of a K awardee himself or herself. In the past, it was if you were taking care of somebody else, but if you yourself were sick, that was not one of the eligible criteria for getting this award, but we have expanded this to include your own personal life event or critical life event or illness. So there are currently 23 institutes and centers across NIH which participate in this, and the first available due date for this new enhanced 70,000 versus the previous 50,000 supplements, they were first made available in January 16, 2023. So we hope to see more applications coming in through the different ICs who are signed on, and we hope that many of you who experience these events will be applying. The next one, please. So what is different between this .. . No, the previous one, please. You skipped one slide. If you could go back one slide, please. The next one after that, please don't skip. So what is difference between .. . the difference between this and the previous issuance was that we have clearer language, updated information. We have added activity codes which are eligible to apply, so different kinds of case, updated the eligibility, and we anticipate more applications coming in. By the way, we have these two notice. One is for K awardees, and the other one is for first-time recipients of R01s. So if you're an early stage investigator with one R01 and would like to either renew your grant or apply for a second one, you are also eligible to apply using the NOT-OD-23-032. The next slide, please. Please proceed with the next slide. So this is a new FOA from the ORWH which is coming out soon. It hasn't. It is not yet on the streets, but we are hoping within the next couple of days, maybe tomorrow or even next week, this will be available for people to apply to. Now, we call it the Advancing Gender Inclusive Excellence, or the AGIE Coordinating Center. It is a U24 cooperative agreement, and it is a joint project of the ORWH and the National Institute of Diabetes and Kidney Diseases. And what we are hoping to achieve is to get at least some applications applying to be the coordinating center for a grant which aims to put in place or promote institutional rather than individual interventions to promote gender equity be it in faculty recruitment, retention or advancement to leadership positions, particularly of women. So the coordinating center .. . so this will be just one award for one institution .. . will need to develop a research strategy and lead and manage the overall program. In the second year of the award, we hope to be able to provide or make available pilot studies for other institutions to apply to, which will then support and provide some funding for pilot awards to investigate programs meant to address the systemic gender-based inequities. So instead of giving it to an individual, it's going to be given to an institution for them to be able to put in place some interventions to achieve gender-inclusive excellence. So the application deadline for this soon-to-come-out FOA is May 31, 2023, and we have another submission date for resubmissions in case there is no fundable application that comes in for the first deadline or for those who wish to resubmit if they have submitted before. The resubmission deadline is January 31, 2024, so again, this is one of the initiatives of the careers section, to be able to put in place interventions across a department, a college or a university which will move the needle so that more women are able to apply and be retained within the faculty and achieve leadership positions. The next slide, please. Again, because of some earmarked funds from Congress, we were able to launch a new program called the Team Science Leadership Scholars Program in autoimmune and immune-mediated diseases. Now, this is a funding opportunity announcement, and the RFA number .. . Please do not advance the slides. Go back to the previous one, please. Could you go to the previous slides? No. Prior to that, please. Yes. Please stay there for a while. Yeah, so this Team Science Leadership Program, again, as mentioned, has a deadline on February 20, 2023, and more information can be gleaned from that website that we have highlighted in yellow. ORWH likes to partner with the other ICs at NIH, and this time it is a partnership between ORWH and the NIAMS. It's a joint initiative which will prepare women .. . most likely women who are in their mid-career, associate professors or such, prepare them to become future leaders. And the AMP-AIM .. . By the way, for those who want to know what is AMP AIM, AMP AIM was actually launched in 2014 by Dr. Francis Collins, who was then the NIH director. It's a public-private partnership between NIH, the USFDA, multiple biopharmaceutical and life-science companies, nonprofit and other organizations, and the aim was to develop new ways of identifying and validating promising biological targets for diagnostics and drug development. Now, in 2021, the AMP AIM Program was launched, and the purpose was to increase the understanding of cellular and molecular interactions that lead to inflammation and autoimmune disease, and it is part of the second iteration of the original AMP Rheumatoid Arthritis Project. It now includes, in addition to RA, lupus and Sjogren's, and I think psoriasis as well, and a total of four disease groups. It is managed by the Foundation for NIH with support from NIAMS, the NI Dental and Cranial Research Center as well as the NIAID, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, in partnership with the ORWH. The newest IC that signed onto the AMP AIM was the National Eye Institute, so in addition to 13 public and private partners and the Foundation for NIH. So this AMP AIM program wants to use or is intending to capitalize on this platform, which includes an infrastructure, data-storage, data-sharing technologies in order to advance the careers of prospective women leaders. So the scientists chosen to participate in the program will have the opportunity to leverage all of their resources, including the professionals associated with the AMP AIM program to increase their skill sets and tackle complex issues so that they will be ready to lead collaborative endeavors in the future across multiple sectors. So this is a very ambitious program that we recently launched. And for more information, you can see it on the slide there, where you can find more information about this AMP AIM program. Again, the deadline is fast approaching. It's on February 20, 2023. The next slide, please. So the NOSIs on Interventions Designed to Culture to Mitigate or Eliminate Sexual Harassment, we know that sexual harassment is one of the barriers preventing women from achieving leadership status. So this NOSI, actually .. . Oh, please do not advance yet. Go back to the previous slide. So this NOSI is actually designed and has been in place since last year, so this is the second year that we might be funding awards for this NOSI, which is actually attached to a PAR from NIGMS, so National Institute of General Medical Sciences. The scientific contact for this award is Dr. Lisa Begg, assisted by Dr. Ben Johns, and the next available submission date, which is the third round for this NOSI, is on October 13, 2023. So in fiscal year 2022, two awards were made. For this fiscal year, we have not yet selected which awards are going to be funded, but then, just to let you know, the next round will have a deadline on October 13, 2023. The next one, please. So the latest initiative that the section has is this new project with the National Academy of Science, Engineering, Math and Medicine. The project title is Policies and Practices for Supporting Caregivers Working in Science, Technology, Engineering, Math and Medicine, Advancing Inclusive Excellence in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic. So everybody knows when COVID hit, the hardest hit were women, women scientists, who were not only pursuing their careers. They were also teaching their children, caring for their parents and their spouses. So caregiving is, again, one of those barriers that women face disproportionately compared to men, and so we want to address all of these barriers. So we are supporting this project for NASEM, which has convened an expert committee to study this issue, and in the end we hope will recommend programs and policies that will support women scientists and other caregivers, including men who are caregivers so that they are able to navigate their personal and professional challenges in the wake of the pandemic and beyond. So there will be two public symposia in 2023. There is a website for the National Academies, which is listed here in the slide, and ORWH is the lead agency at NIH with participation of the office of Scientific Workforce Diversity, the OER, NINR, NHLBI, NCI and NIA, National Institute of Aging, and maybe other future partners. It may broaden the scope of NIH family-friendly policies and hope that we will have flexibilities on account and after COVID as well as NRSA support for our trainees. So other sponsors are the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Henry Luce Foundation, other federal agencies such as the NIST, NASA, NSF and NOAA. So with that, I would like to thank everybody. These are the initiatives that we have from the ORWH which seek to address gender inequities, particularly for women. They are also intended to improve the representation of other under-represented groups, and these include, for instance, people with disabilities. These also include sex and gender minorities, et cetera. So with that, I am happy to take questions, and thank you. We have slides on the ORWH. Please go to the ORWH website where you will find multiple resources addressing the various issues that affect women in biomedical careers, as well as people in general, men and women, who would like to know more about women's health. Thank you. I'm happy to take questions at this point. I do not see any question yet on the chat box. So the question is, "Do you need to sign up for ORWH NIDA to apply to the BIRCWH Scholars Innovation Program?" So first of all, that project that we mentioned about the Innovation Program, that is only open to BIRCWH scholars because the earmark from Congress was actually specifically for advancing BIRCWH. And as mentioned, it is currently being administered with the Medical University of South Carolina, and so data on this, or applications on this, will have to be channeled through them. But it's not an open solicitation because you will have to be a BIRCWH scholar or be associated with a BIRCWH in order to apply for that particular opportunity.

M.S. Daryl Turner: I have another question.

Xenia T. Tigno, Ph.D.: Yeah.

M.S. Daryl Turner: All right. The question is, "It seems most of the efforts are focused toward academic positions. Are there any dedicated efforts for small business, SBIR, STTR, industry?"

Xenia T. Tigno, Ph.D.: Currently, not yet, but we are wanting, and it is our ambition, because women in biomedical careers are not just in the academe. There are women who are science writers, so they're in publishing. There are women who are program officers at the NIH, so they're government also. There are women who have their own businesses. Many of them are women-focused businesses, like things that women use, for instance, and gadgets for women, so we are actually interested in promoting that line of work. Right now, there is an initiative for innovations in technology, and we will be very happy if you have any interest to direct you towards Ms. Jamie White, who is actually our S-Gen-I guru, so sex and gender and technology initiatives and innovations. And she partners with a number of institutions, so including the FNIH as well as other philanthropic organizations, and they have this technology hub, so to speak, that they want to promote in order for women's health to also have a component which is industry. So from the careers section, at this point, we do not have any, but we hope to be able to establish collaborations with industry, with philanthropy, with other government agencies, with the academe in order to be able for women to cross sectors and not be penalized for that. For instance, a woman wants to do an internship for a few months in a pharmaceutical firm. We wouldn't want her to be penalized by her department chair if she does that and instead consider it as a learning opportunity and an opportunity to learn more skills and be more relevant to the general workforce.

M.S. Daryl Turner: Thank you. Okay, I have another question. It says, "Can BIRCWH scholars be recruited from institutions that are not the award recipients? An example: Can they have a different home institution?"

Xenia T. Tigno, Ph.D.: Well, the BIRCWH program is administered by a program director for a particular institution. I do not know if they are amenable to recruiting from another institution which is not a BIRCWH institution, but I believe that that possibility exists. For instance, if the BIRCWH institution is in a particular state and there is another college or institution in that same state who recommends to the program director, I guess it's a way of .. . It's establishing a collaboration with a current program director in your state that will facilitate that kind of interaction. But please send us your question, and I will be happy to direct it to Dr. Lisa Begg, who is the program officer of the BIRCWH program. Please do post your e-mail address and put it on the Q and A, which we will collect so that we can go back to you, or you can e-mail us at ORWH.

M.S. Daryl Turner: Okay. All right. The next question, "Would you please talk more about the new initiative that will have a call around spring of 2023?"

Xenia T. Tigno, Ph.D.: Oh, the AGIE program, I think, is what you are referring to. The AGIE program, there are many programs which seem to target the individual and say, "Oh, in order for women to achieve leadership positions, they need to enroll in this or that leadership training course," so they are very individual oriented. The AGIE program is actually institution oriented. In other words, the institution will have to be the one to initiate these programs in order for them to put together initiatives or interventions that are intended to, say, recruit more women to their faculty. Say it's an engineering school, and they have a dearth of women applicants. How do you make it more attractive for women engineers to apply to your school and not feel that male applicants will have an edge? So these are really intended to be systemic or institutional interventions versus individual interventions. So the coordinating center will be like the hub for all of these, so then other universities or colleges can apply for pilot grants for them to be able to test whether this or that intervention would work in order, say, to increase the number of women faculty members or in order to encourage women faculty members to stay in case they experience life events and think I'll just drop out from the workforce because I have to tend to my family. So things like that, that come directly from the institution rather than being an initiative from the individual who is affected. The AGIE program is intended to provide that coordinating center which will have in place data on interventions that have worked for other universities, for instance. They will be collecting the data from the different pilots studies that they will award, and they will be organizing the meetings so that the different universities who apply for the pilot awards can meet each other.

M.S. Daryl Turner: Okay, and next question, "Are there any funding opportunities, women scholars, for their career advancement and training?"

Xenia T. Tigno, Ph.D.: So the BIRCWH program is one. It's a K12. Again, if your university happens to be BIRCWH, then you can apply to that program. For women in general, in every RFA or FOA that is issued by the NIH, women are always encouraged to apply. We are not allowed to say that only women can apply because that is against the law, if you discriminate one group versus the other. But there are certain FOAs, for instance, the Re-entry Program and the Continuity Supplements. The majority of those who apply for these supplements are women because they are the ones who are impacted by, say, childbirth or adoption or caring for other individuals in their family. So while it is not exclusively for women, men caregivers can also apply, for instance. Most of the applicants are women. So I .. . When we say, "We adhere to the NIH policy of promoting diversity," diversity includes not only racial and gender minorities. It also includes women in particular career levels. For instance, professors or deans in universities are usually not women, so you are a minority in that particular level, so diversity has a broad term, and I invite you to look at the NIH statement on that.

M.S. Daryl Turner: Thank you. We have another 2 minutes, so I'll go ahead and now just phrase one more question here at least, and this one is, "I assume that it will depend on the institute, but I'm wondering if one can apply for the Continuity and Retention Administrative Supplement if they are going to .. . excuse me .. . if they are going into their final no-cost extension year of the K award."

Xenia T. Tigno, Ph.D.: So this has arisen, and we have been asked that question. Normally, we do not advise you to apply for the Continuity Supplement if you're on an NCE because you're not able to receive funds anymore because it's a no-cost extension. However, having said that, some ICs are more flexible than others, so the best thing to do is to contact your program officer and ask if that particular IC is willing to consider your application. So we have 23 ICs signed onto these supplements, and each of them has their own set of rules, so the best way to find out is to again contact your program officer who would be the most knowledgeable about it.

M.S. Daryl Turner: Okay, and I have one last question. "Are there any funding opportunities" .. . Excuse me. I have 1 minute remaining here. It looks like we're going to run out of time for this one. I will say that we will get back to you, and we'll try to answer these questions the best way possible. So I would like to thank Dr. Tigno for your time. We greatly appreciate you.

Xenia T. Tigno, Ph.D.: Thank you, and please do reach out to us. We are willing to listen, and we are always .. . Our ears are always open to hearing recommendations from the audience and from our grants community, so thank you.