

**ASBMB response to the National Institutes of Health request for information on a proposed
emeritus award for senior investigators**

Submitted March 2, 2015

1. *Community interest in an emeritus award that allows a senior investigator to transition out of a role or position that relies on funding from NIH research grants*

The ASBMB is not in favor of such an award. Economic incentives typically benefit the group receiving the direct investment. Thus, emeritus awards will benefit eligible senior scientists; however, even with the stipulation that the award focus on mentoring, its effects, if any, on junior faculty members will be difficult to discern. Moreover, as discussed in point 6, such an award mechanism may have several unintended consequences.

2. *Ideas for how one would utilize an emeritus award (e.g., to facilitate laboratory closure; to promote partnership between a senior and junior investigator; to provide opportunities for acquiring skills needed for transitioning to a new role)*

It is not clear how or why an emeritus award mechanism should be used. Mechanisms already exist that allow a retiring investigator to assign his/her grant to another faculty member and ensure a line of research is continued. Similarly, research grants with co-investigators already provide a mechanism for a senior investigator to pass on information and materials to a junior investigator. We are not aware of data that demonstrate these mechanisms are insufficient to accomplish the goals of the proposed emeritus award. Finally, when an institution and senior investigator agree that the investigator will transition to a new role, the institution should ensure, financially and in all other manners, that the investigator has the opportunity to acquire the necessary skills for the new role.

Mentoring of junior faculty by senior faculty is beneficial for the scientists involved and the larger community, and these events already occur. It is not clear that the NIH needs to institute a new award mechanism specifically to encourage events that are already occurring. Rather, the NIH should introduce or strengthen potential training components of co-investigator R01 and other research awards.

3. *Suggestions for the specific characteristics for an emeritus award (e.g., number of years of support; definition of a junior faculty partner)*

As stated in our response to question 2, it is not clear how or why such a mechanism should be used.

4. *Ways in which NIH could incentivize the use of an emeritus award, from the perspectives of both senior investigators and institutions*

In a Feb. 18 webinar, Dr. Sally Rockey said that one of the goals of the NIH is to “increase churn in the workforce.” An emeritus award does this only if the NIH can use this award to decrease the population of senior scientists. It is not clear that the NIH has the authority to do this. Furthermore, established senior investigators can be very productive and resourceful at advanced ages and after long careers. They are currently competing for and obtaining R01 grants. It is not clear that there are or should be

incentives that would convince institutions to encourage these scientists to stop making valuable contributions to the institution and the scientific community.

5. *Impediments to the participation in such an award program, from the perspectives of both senior investigators and institutions*

In her webinar, Dr. Sally Rockey said that an emeritus award would be distinct from other research awards as it would be understood by all parties that the emeritus award would be the final award a researcher receives from the NIH. The finality of this restriction itself may disincentivize participation in the mechanism. Furthermore, it is not clear how an emeritus award would affect senior investigators that are a part of P series or other large grants. This lack of clarity may also disincentivize participation.

6. *Any additional comments you would like to offer to NIH on this topic*

Instituting an emeritus award could have several unintended consequences.

First, in a stagnant budget environment, the money for such an award must be taken from other pools of NIH grants that fund investigators at all career stages. Thus, taking money from other programs to fund an emeritus award could harm just as many investigators as the NIH is trying to help.

Second, an emeritus award increases churn only if the award shortens the career of a scientist, or reduces the amount of money that scientist receives. However, without the legal authority to compel scientists at specific ages or career stages into such an emeritus award, the award could just as well extend someone's career and exacerbate the aging workforce issues the NIH is trying to alter.

Third, the potential of this award to provide active scientific career guidance for early-career women and minorities while decreasing the time gaps to independence is significant. In fact, some fora have inadvertently advertised this as an award for underrepresented minorities. However, there is a risk of creating a more insular research model whereby mentors will simply mentor those with backgrounds similar to their own. Thus, the proposed emeritus award may further entrench some of the diversity problems the enterprise faces today.