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NIH Efforts to Eradicate Structural Racism In Extramural Research Begin to Take Root

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NIH plans to establish an Office of Minority Serving Institutions “to assist with coordination and efforts targeting minority-serving institutions.” Creating this office is among the “implementation priorities” described at a recent meeting of the highest-ranking NIH external advisory committee but was mentioned almost in passing by Anna Ordóñez, director of the Office of Clinical Research at the National Institute of Mental Health.^[1]

Ordóñez presented an update of the “E” (for extramural) committee during day two of the NIH Advisory Committee to the Director (ACD) meeting in December. It was the last before Director Francis Collins turned the reins over to acting Director Larry Tabak on Dec. 20.

The committee is part of the UNITE initiative NIH launched in February to address structural racism in biomedical research.^[2] The new office was only briefly discussed, and it was not included on the slides used by Ordóñez.^[3] Leaders of the other UNITE committees also gave updates.

A significant development in the peer review arena is a “decoupling of the science from the investigator environment criteria,” which Ordóñez said would result in “really opening the door for first stage review without [the] investigator or institution” being known to reviewers.

“The systematic advantages of reputation, network and pedigree are deeply entrenched in the culture of the biomedical research enterprise and rarely benefit underrepresented groups,” Ordóñez said, “so members of this committee are engaging with the NIH Center for Scientific Review to support an effort to simplify peer review criteria” via a decoupling.

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