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By Theresa Defino

#### **NIH Reports Slight Funding Improvement for 'At-Risk' Investigators**

With a promise of “more attention this year, both inside and outside NIH” to the issue of boosting funding for “at-risk” investigators, Michael Lauer, deputy director for extramural research, recently shared mixed results of earlier efforts. NIH defines at-risk investigators as those “who developed meritorious applications who would not have significant NIH research funding if the application under consideration is not awarded.” Other categories are early stage, which means “no prior support as a principal investigator on substantial independent research award and within 10 years of a terminal research degree or end of post-graduate clinical training”; “other new,” defined as no prior support but not considered early stage; and established, which means having “current substantial research support with at least one future year of support irrespective of the results of the current year’s competition(s).”

Writing on his *Open Mike* blog on Feb. 7, Lauer said that in both 2016 and 2017, “the funding rates for at-risk investigators were lower than for early-stage investigators (22% or 21% vs 24%) and much lower than for established investigators (22% or 21% vs 29%).” For the two most recent years, however, the “picture changes.” In both 2018 and 2019, “the funding rate for at-risk investigators had increased to 27% (almost equivalent to that for early-stage investigators), which was only slightly lower than the funding rate for established investigators (at 31%).” The effort to support at-risk investigators is part of NIH’s Next Generation Researchers initiative. Lauer added that a “promising signal we have heard about that may help this group is bridge funding opportunities being offered by an investigator’s home institution that provide a year of funding if an at risk applicant gets a score that is close to the payline while they continue to submit applications.” He pledged that NIH would “continue to pay close attention to the types of investigators we are supporting.”

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