

Being a Program Leader in the Office of Strategic Coordination:

What does the job entail?

The Office of Strategic Coordination (OSC) at the NIH has responsibility for management of the NIH Common Fund (<http://commonfund.nih.gov>). With a budget of over \$670 Million each year, the Common Fund supports approximately 30 bold scientific program areas, each of which is designed to change the way science is conducted. This may be through transformative scientific research that establishes new scientific fields or paradigms, the generation of comprehensive data sets or other resources that catalyze investigator-initiated research, or through initiatives that test new ways to manage the biomedical research enterprise. Common Fund programs are goal-driven, with the intent of delivering data/tools/technologies/methods to the community for broad use within a maximum of 10 years. These attributes mandate that a clear vision is articulated before each program begins and that processes to assess utility of the deliverables are established.

The design and implementation of Common Fund programs is an intensive, collaborative activity within NIH. Common Fund programs are developed and managed as partnerships between the NIH Office of the Director (OD) – via OSC – and the NIH Institutes and Centers (ICs). Each Common Fund program is planned and implemented by an NIH-wide Working Group composed of scientific staff from multiple ICs working with an OSC Program Leader as a representative of the OD. The Working Group defines clear goals and milestones for the program, creates funding opportunities, makes funding recommendations, works with grantees to ensure consortium members work together fluidly to achieve program goals, and makes adjustments throughout the life of the program to provide optimal support for the science.

Leadership and Strategic Management

The OSC Program Leader for each program plays a pivotal role in all phases of the program. During the planning stages, the OSC Program Leader helps the group understand how Common Fund programs differ from traditional NIH programs. They help to ensure that diverse perspectives are considered, that deliverables for the program are defined, and that initiatives fill strategic gaps or exploit new opportunities. While encouraging broad discussion, the OSC Program Leader also helps the Working Group focus on programmatic objectives that will have exceptional impact within a 5-10 year period. Working closely with the Working Group, they consider requirements for Funding Opportunities, helping the documents state the purpose and objectives clearly so that applicants are more likely to address the goals of the program. They help to ensure that the awards to be funded from each initiative include outstanding science, NIH-wide relevance, and diverse, innovative approaches. They work closely with the Working Group to consider strategies for post-award management of the science. Will investigators need to work together to achieve overarching goals? After awards are made, might supplements be needed to bolster the program? How should progress be assessed as the program proceeds? What are the communication and dissemination strategies that must be developed to ensure that the end-users of the data/technologies/tools know about the deliverables from the program? The Program Leader serves as a critical two-way conduit of information from the Working Group and the investigators to OD Leadership and back, ensuring that all components of the program work fluidly together, that strategies to achieve goals are established, and that efficacy is assessed.

Sound Judgment and Critical Thinking

Ultimately, the responsibility for the expenditure of Common Fund dollars lies with the NIH Director, since the funds are part of the OD budget. The NIH Director is actively engaged in the specification of

goals for Common Fund programs and for the development of a general budget envelope. They also provide guidance with respect to specific funding initiatives that may contribute to the programmatic goals. However, decision-making responsibility for each program after the broad plans are established is delegated to the Deputy Director of NIH for Program Coordination, Planning, and Strategic Initiatives. As OSC lies within the Division of Program Coordination, Planning, and Strategic Initiatives (DPCPSI), the OSC Director provides approvals for details of each program. Decisions are based on recommendations from the program Working Group. The OSC Program Leader helps to build consensus for these recommendations and provides additional perspectives to OSC Leadership. Leadership includes the OSC Director, the Deputy Director, and three Assistant Directors who oversee the three program teams in the office, and serve as the direct supervisors for the Program Leaders on their teams.

OSC program teams are divided into three categories based on the type of research activities conducted by Common Fund programs. Programs managed by the Transformative Scientific Discovery team establish new scientific principles, models, and research resources. They also transform scientific knowledge and paths to discovery. Programs overseen by the Catalytic Data Resources team generate biomedical research data, as well as exploring ways to make large, complex datasets more findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable, or FAIR, so that the entire research community can use the data to make new discoveries. Common Fund programs managed by the Re-engineering the Research Enterprise team facilitate development of new therapies or preventative strategies as well as testing and evaluating new models for supporting the biomedical/behavior research workforce.

The OSC Program Leaders work with OSC Leadership to consider requests from all programs for possible expansion. Analysis of relevance to the overarching goals of the program is keenly important, but a critical examination of the science and proposed costs is also imperative. On occasion, program contraction or elimination may also be considered. Recommendations are justified to the DPCPSI Director, which includes a discussion of the program as a whole. While deep scientific expertise on all Common Fund programs would be difficult for an individual to achieve, the OSC Program Leader provides sufficient expertise on their program areas and of the specific matter at hand to allow for sound decision making on all funding issues. They balance advocacy for the program with stewardship of the Common Fund.

Representing the Office of the Director

OSC Program Leaders play a crucial role in representing the NIH Office of the Director to external groups. During the course of planning each program, extensive interaction with the scientific community and other stakeholders occurs. OSC Program Leaders interact with these individuals to foster discussion of the cutting edges of science: what are the most exciting opportunities in science for which Common Fund investment can have a transformative impact? Development of ideas for new Common Fund programs requires that OSC Program Leaders articulate the criteria for Common Fund programs clearly: what types of issues are suitable for the Common Fund, and what are not? This

establishing and using shared protocols, etc. Although the IC Leaders for each program provide strong leadership role in these activities, the OSC Program Leader provides an important voice as the representative of the OD, from which funds are provided.

Interaction with external groups also includes discussion with the NIH Council of Councils, which advises the NIH Director with respect to use of the Common Fund. The OSC Program Leader helps ensure that ideas for new Common Fund programs that are brought forward for Council discussion are clear. They may also provide updates to the Council during the implementation phases. The OSC Program Leader serves as a representative of each program to the Council and also ensures that IC Colleagues and funded investigators from the program are provided an opportunity to participate in Council meetings when needed.

Working Within OSC

OSC is a small office with a big mission. To manage a budget of over \$670 Million with ~50 people who make up OSC, each person in the office interacts with, and relies on, many colleagues in the ICs. Much of the work of OSC Program Leaders involves interaction with Program Officers in the ICs. However, each OSC Program Leader also works with Policy, Communication, and Evaluation staff in OSC to ensure that the Common Fund budget is justified to Congress each year, that communication strategies for their assigned programs are robust, and that evaluative information is obtained when needed. The Operations Team in OSC orchestrates the complex processes of Funding Opportunity Announcement issuance and information sharing with Grants Management and Budget Offices across the NIH. They also manage processes through which Common Fund Working Groups prepare annual operating budgets, request budget changes, seek support for staffing within their ICs for Common Fund program support, and other activities. One responsibility of the OSC Program Leader is to understand the complexities of Common Fund management so that they can provide appropriate input as needed to others in the office.