PREFACE

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is the world's largest public funder of biomedical and behavioral research. In FY2025, NIH invested nearly 82% of its $48 billion budget in extramural research, primarily by awarding almost 50,000 competitive grants to more than 300,000 researchers at over 2,500 universities, medical schools, and other research institutions across every state and around the world (https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/organization/budget).

Despite strong public and congressional support for NIH's mission to translate scientific discoveries into improved ways to prevent, diagnose, and treat illness, demand for NIH funds has consistently outpaced supply. This hypercompetitive funding environment means many meritorious research proposals do not receive grant support, making it increasingly difficult for investigators to secure the resources needed to carry out their work. In this already challenging climate, 2025 proved to be an exceptionally disruptive year for NIH and the biomedical and behavioral research community. Policy-driven restrictions, halted study section and advisory council meetings, and grant terminations all contributed to widespread setbacks in research funding.

Early in the year, federal directives limited agency communications and travel, preventing NIH from publishing required public notices for study section meetings. As a result, many meetings were cancelled or postponed, leaving investigators uncertain about reviews, summary statements, and funding decisions. These difficulties were compounded by a federal government shutdown beginning October 1, 2025. During the shutdown, NIH extramural operations were largely halted, with staff furloughed, grant awards unable to be issued, and peer-review and advisory council meetings cancelled. Although electronic submissions continued to be accepted, applications could not be processed, reviewed, or funded. The shutdown lasted 43 days, creating a backlog of over 370 cancelled review meetings and more than 24,000 unreviewed applications (https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-26-012.html).

After the shutdown ended in November, NIH quickly began rescheduling study section meetings and implemented temporary emergency measures (https://grants.nih.gov/news-events/nih-extramural-nexus-news/2025/11/emergency-modifications-to-nih-peer-review). These measures included streamlining peer-review discussions, adjusting the proportion of applications formally discussed, and simplifying summary statements to handle the accumulated workload more efficiently. Despite these interventions, delays in funding decisions are still expected, creating short-term uncertainty for researchers and institutions relying on steady federal support.

Looking ahead to 2026, NIH and the research community are likely to face both challenges and opportunities. Recovery efforts will continue that focus on clearing backlogs in peer review, funding new grants, and restoring research momentum. Because early-stage investigators tend to be particularly vulnerable to disruptions, those affected by 2025 delays may benefit from targeted funding, mentoring, and other support to minimize any setbacks in their research programs and career trajectories. Investigators and institutions will continue to navigate the hypercompetitive environment for a limited pool of funds, which may ebb and flow but is unlikely to end soon.

The President's budget request for FY 2026 proposes funding the NIH at about $27.9 billion, a roughly 40% reduction from 2025's enacted level along with significant restructuring of its

institutes and centers (https://officeofbudget.od.nih.gov/). In contrast, Congress (House and Senate appropriations committees) has moved to reject those deep cuts and instead maintain or modestly increase NIH funding, with proposals around $48-48.7 billion for NIH in their FY 2026 appropriations bills (https://www.science.org/content/article/house-republicans-add-support-maintaining-nih-budget-2026). Given that the President's budget is only a starting point, and Congress ultimately determines appropriations, we are encouraged that many of the proposed cuts are likely to be avoided, meaning federal research funding should remain resilient in 2026 and beyond. Nevertheless, successful grant applicants will be those who have unwavering commitment to making the adjustments necessary to cope with today's (and tomorrow's) reality.

Those facts bring us to the premise of this *Workbook*, which is: To be successful in these hyper-competitive times, you must do far more than your peers to ensure that your grant proposal is competitive. You must take a strategic, "no-stone-left-unturned" approach that maximizes the efficiency of the proposal-writing process and thus your application's competitiveness. This *Workbook* will help you to take those critical "extra" steps that we consider keys to success. That position is based on our personal experience writing successful grant applications, collective experience of more than 20 years serving on NIH study sections, and 30 years' experience since GWSW was founded in helping literally thousands of other investigators write grant proposals. To us, it stands to reason that, if you do more to position your proposal for success than your competitors do, it will be your applications that prevail, and it will be theirs that fail.

In the theater, the last words of encouragement that an actor often hears before going on stage are, "Break a leg." We don't know what the equivalent is with respect to writing a grant application, but whatever it is, it would likely translate as, "Good luck." But, as you will see, luck doesn't play much of a role in the process of getting funded – unless, of course, it is the kind that Thomas Jefferson was referring to when he wisely remarked, "I'm a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work the more of it I have." We agree with him, so let's get to work!

John D. Robertson	*Stephen W. Russell*	David C. Morrison
John D. Robertson, Ph.D. Managing Member	Stephen W. Russell, DVM, Ph.D. Member (Emeritus) & Co-Founder	David C. Morrison, Ph.D. Member (Emeritus) & Co-Founder