

## Director's 20th Anniversary Message – Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research



The year 2015 marks the 20th anniversary of the National Institutes of Health's Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR). The establishment of OBSSR 20 years ago by the U.S. Congress recognized the importance of behavioral and social factors in the prevention and treatment of disability and disease.

The contributions of these factors to health are not minor.

### **OBSSR at 20: “No more exciting time to be a behavioral and social scientist”**

Behavioral and social factors account for more than half of the premature deaths in this country. This has become the clarion call for the behavioral and social sciences to improve our understanding of health behaviors and social determinants of health. We answer this call by seeking out new and better methods to improve health through the modification of these behavioral and social contributors to illness.

Over the past 20 years, OBSSR has led the field in answering this call. It has worked with the behavioral and social scientists throughout the 27 NIH institutes and centers to increase our understanding of these factors and to develop and evaluate interventions for positive behavior change and health improvement.

There is, perhaps, no more exciting time to be a behavioral and social scientist. Indeed, some of my "baby boom" colleagues have mentioned how great it would be to start our careers now.

The complex interplay of behaviors and social influences to brain function and genetic influences is being elucidated at an ever accelerating pace. Recent technological advances have led to a data rich environment for the study of behavior and social context and greatly improved our ability to objectively measure these phenomena.

These same technological advances have provided new approaches and delivery systems for changing behavior that are infinitely adaptive and scalable. New research methods and analytics are being developed to leverage the

information available from the increasingly rich data available to behavioral and social sciences researchers.

Over its 20 years, OBSSR has helped lead in the development and adoption of these new behavioral and social science approaches as they have unfolded, encouraging trans-disciplinary exploration and embracing new scientific developments to harness the power of behavioral and social sciences to transform biomedical research, clinical interventions, and public health.

These efforts are evident in the range of areas that OBSSR has addressed, including chronic disease management, treatment adherence, health communications, health information technology and mHealth, mental health, sexually transmitted infections, health disparities, genetics, obesity, systems science, community based participatory research, behavioral economics, and many others.

Our work over the years has lived up to our 20th Anniversary theme, *Healthier Lives through Behavioral and Social Sciences*. As we embark in this year of celebration, we consider our past accomplishments while also anticipating the challenges facing behavioral and social sciences in the future. We strive to remain a catalyst for advances in behavioral and social sciences research and the dissemination of its findings and contributions. Our support of various training efforts prepares the next generation of behavior and social sciences researchers to address these challenges.

The work of OBSSR has truly been a team effort. The leadership of past directors Norman Anderson, Raynard Kington, David Abrams, and Robert Kaplan has been instrumental in charting the course for OBSSR over the past 20 years. OBSSR has also benefited from a committed staff and from our behavioral and social science colleagues in the various NIH institutes and centers.

It is the coalescence of all of these factors that have allowed OBSSR to be in the position to celebrate the many accomplishments of the last 20 years and to look forward with excitement at the behavioral and social science research findings yet to come.