

## **On the Planned National Space Biomedical Research Institute: Letter Report**

Committee on Space Biology and Medicine, National  
Research Council

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## On the Planned National Space Biomedical Research Institute

*On October 10, 1996, Dr. Claude R. Canizares, chair of the Space Studies Board, and Dr. Mary Jane Osborn, chair of the Committee on Space Biology and Medicine, sent the following letter to Dr. Arnauld Nicogossian, acting associate administrator for NASA's Office of Life and Microgravity Sciences and Applications.*

During the past year and a half, NASA has been actively exploring the possibility of establishing independent science institutes that would operate cooperatively with the agency's field centers. The objectives of these institutes have included strengthening the quality of NASA science and the relationship between NASA's science programs and the university community.

The Space Studies Board has maintained an active dialogue with agency officials as planning for these institutes has evolved and matured. In response to NASA requests, the Board issued short reports on the role of center science and scientists (Center Science Letter—March 29, 1995) and on the role and character of the proposed institutes themselves (Institutes Letter—August 11, 1995). In a comprehensive analysis of NASA science management, [\*Managing the Space Sciences\*](#) (National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., 1995), the Board addressed a broad range of topics, many of which were related to the formation of the institutes. The Board notes that institute planning has been responsive to its guidance on the essential role of Headquarters in peer review and selection. It is our understanding now, however, that failure to obtain relief from certain federal employment regulations precludes the establishment of any of the proposed institutes save a biomedical institute associated with Johnson Space Center (JSC).

In reviewing the Cooperative Agreement Notice (CAN) for the planned National Space Biomedical Research Institute (NSBRI) at JSC, the Board has identified a major concern. An essential requirement for the success of this proposed institute in strengthening programs to be hosted there is a scrupulous attention to the integrity of all aspects of program management. The Board is concerned about the following provision in the CAN:

- **Management of the NASA Biomedical Research Program—NASA's**

intent is for the Institute to manage (e.g., identify, prioritize, and recommend biomedical research thrusts and associated priorities, recommend research questions to be included in solicitations, and administer successful grants) the overall NASA biomedical Research and Analysis (R&A) effort. This approach would facilitate the execution of a comprehensive, and integrated research plan to support human space exploration. (p. 15)

This provision is in direct conflict with the general principles guiding current planning for downsizing at NASA, namely that Headquarters will determine the "what" and "why" of the research program, with field centers determining the "how" (as stated, for example, in "FY 1996 Administrator's Guidance," February 2, 1996). The provision is at variance with CAN Table 2, which includes among "HQ/NASA HEDS Enterprise" responsibilities the following:

- Provide strategic planning, policy development ...
- Provide program direction, advocacy, and oversight ...

Appendix A of the CAN is consistent with this allocation of responsibilities from Table 2.

The CAN provision also conflicts with major recommendations of the Board. In its Institutes Letter, the Board reserved certain management functions for discharge by Headquarters instead of by institutes or field centers, stating:

Certain internal and external functions described in the Center Science Letter, such as participation in policy formulation and selection of external investigators, are properly the province of government employees, but should not be vested in field centers in order to avoid real or perceived conflicts of interest vis-à-vis outside scientific competitors. It is therefore the recommendation of the Board that these functions be retained by Headquarters, where they should be discharged by government employees. ([Space Studies Board Annual Report—1995](#), National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., 1996, p. 88)

A recommendation in *Managing the Space Sciences* (p. 61) states further:

- **Recommendation 5-12:** Within NASA Headquarters, there must be a capable scientific staff to support management priority setting in order to help ensure compatibility of program content and science priorities. These scientists must also interface with field center managers and external investigators to ensure science program integrity.

In numerous conversations with NASA officials, the Board has received assurances that the agency is fully in accord with these recommendations on research policy formulation and science selection. In a formal response to the second recommendation, Administrator Daniel Goldin (February 28, 1996) stated:

- **Response to Recommendation 5-12:** NASA believes that it has, at least in the past, been able to maintain a capable scientific staff. In the face of downsizing, NASA will need to rely increasingly on the external science community for its advice and participation in priority setting, scientific review of current programs, and strategic planning for future programs.

This is understood to include both contributions by IPA (Intergovernmental Personnel Agreement) scientists within the Headquarters staff as well as by community members serving on volunteer panels advisory to this staff. In addition, Administrator Goldin gave very positive assurances on the primacy of Headquarters in setting research policy during an executive meeting with National Academy of Sciences President Bruce Alberts and the undersigned on April 30, 1996.

Inasmuch as the NSBRI must be free to compete for research funds against other qualified institutions, and this competition must be perceived as equitable and wholly merit-based, the Board recommends revision of the cited language in the CAN to clearly reaffirm NASA's intention to perform vital science policy and program definition functions itself, at Headquarters. The Board believes that continuing the practice of setting research directions and selecting science investigators and investigations at Headquarters, as well as maintaining the necessary qualified staff at Headquarters to carry out these functions, is vital if the agency is to achieve its goal of a first-rate life sciences research program.

We look forward to working with you to strengthen the contributions of NSBRI planning and research to NASA's science and exploration programs.

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