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News You Can Use: Finding a Collaborator

Eight Ways to Find an Intramural Collaborator

BY BRANDON LEVY, OIR



Anne Sumner (<https://irp.nih.gov/pi/anne-sumner>) (National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, NIDDK) was puzzled. In 2010, several prominent organizations, including the World Health Organization and the American Diabetes Association, were promoting the hemoglobin A1C blood test (which provides information about average blood glucose over the previous three months) as a valuable new way to diagnose diabetes and pre-diabetes. The approach, however, didn't appear to work for Sumner's

African immigrant patients.

Her curiosity about the issue led her to fellow NIDDK investigator **Alan Schechter** (<https://irp.nih.gov/pi/alan-schechter>), who referred her to **David Sacks** (<https://irp.nih.gov/pi/david-sacks>), a senior investigator in the Clinical Center's Department of Laboratory Medicine. Since then, the combination of Sumner's clinical acumen and Sacks' laboratory expertise has produced significant new insights into how to diagnose high blood glucose in individuals of African descent, including the discovery that the A1C test is markedly better at diagnosing the condition in that population if it's combined with either a fasting-glucose test or a test for a sugar-bound blood protein called glycated albumin. The two scientists' collaborative work has been detailed in five journal articles and numerous posters, abstracts, and presentations.

"It's a sort of symbiosis," said Sacks. "Together we come up with papers and ideas that we could never have individually."

Sumner and Sacks are not the only NIH researchers who have found that two heads are better than one. It can seem daunting, though, to find a collaborator. There are many ways, however, that Intramural Research Program (IRP) scientists can identify potential collaborators whose interests and skills complement their own. The following eight methods are a good starting point.

The IRP Website (<https://irp.nih.gov/>). In 2009, NIH's scientific directors created a trans-NIH committee, co-chaired by **Andy Baxevanis** (<https://irp.nih.gov/pi/andy-baxevanis>) (National Human Genome Research Institute) and **L. Michelle Bennett** (<https://irp.nih.gov/blog/author/l-michelle-bennett>) (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute), to raise the IRP's profile among the lay public and non-NIH-affiliated researchers. A major component of this initiative was the creation of a new IRP website.

The IRP website includes individual pages for all of the IRP's approximately 1,050 principal investigators, complete with contact information, descriptions of their research, and lists of selected publications. In addition to being searchable by name, the website also handily groups these PI pages into 22 different "Scientific Focus Areas," such as cancer biology, immunology, and neuroscience.

"We wanted to break down the illusory barriers between investigators in different ICs and instead present our PIs as a unified faculty whose research falls into these various areas," said Baxevanis. "This makes it easy to find IRP scientists working on projects related to your own."

Scientific Interest Groups (<https://oir.nih.gov/sigs>). IRP investigators, staff, and fellows can participate in more than 90 different Scientific Interest Groups (or “SIGs”), each focusing on a different research topic, method, or model. SIG meetings feature presentations by both intramural and outside researchers and foster discussion about the latest developments in members’ fields of interest. Some SIGs also sponsor poster sessions and provide mentoring and career guidance for junior scientists.

The SIGs were officially created by former NIH Director **Harold Varmus** in 1993, though several groups now under the SIG umbrella have existed for far longer. Moreover, new scientific developments are constantly catalyzing the creation of new SIGs.

“We’re hoping that by providing this platform, relationships and collaborations will happen in a natural, organic way,” said **Katrina**

Serrano ([https://staffprofiles.cancer.gov/brp/prgmStaffProfile.do?](https://staffprofiles.cancer.gov/brp/prgmStaffProfile.do?contactId=22746322&bioType=flw)

[contactId=22746322&bioType=flw](https://staffprofiles.cancer.gov/brp/prgmStaffProfile.do?contactId=22746322&bioType=flw)) (National Cancer Institute), one of the co-chairs of the new Sex and Gender in Health and Disease SIG, which held its first meeting in January.

The NIH Intramural Database (NIDB) (<https://intramural.nih.gov/>). Launched in 1997, the NIDB contains a wide array of information about the activities of NIH researchers, including annual reports detailing their current projects and related publications. The database is comprehensive because all research projects that use IRP funds must file annual reports in the NIDB. Simply selecting a year and an IC (or “All ICs”) and entering a search term yields a list of related researchers and their projects, making it easy to identify potential collaborators.

“In terms of finding specific information about potential collaborators, the NIDB is an outstanding way to do it,” said **Richard Wyatt** (<https://oir.nih.gov/about/leadership-staff/richard-wyatt>), deputy director of the NIH Office of Intramural Research, which manages the database. “Many scientists don’t know about it.”

The DDIR Web Board (<http://ddir.nih.gov>). The DDIR Web Board is an online bulletin board featuring information about topics of concern to the NIH community, including new programs, upcoming events, and recently created SIGs. The site was launched in June 1994 to serve as a direct line of communication between NIH leadership and the intramural community. It is managed by **Michael Gottesman** (<https://irp.nih.gov/pi/michael-gottesman>), deputy director for intramural

research, who also offers his thoughts on recent NIH happenings in collections of monthly postings to the Web Board. The site can only be accessed on the NIH network.

The (<https://irp.nih.gov/catalyst>) **NIH Catalyst** (<https://irp.nih.gov/catalyst>). If you're reading this article, you clearly already know about the *NIH Catalyst*, the every-other-month newsletter that covers a wide array of goings-on in the IRP, including news and events, and publishes profiles and stories on new scientific research. But did you know that the publication, which made its debut in February 1993, was conceived by former NIH Deputy Director for Intramural Research **Lance Liotta** (<https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/what-we-do/nih-almanac/lance-liotta-phd-md>) as a way to foster the exchange of ideas and opinions among NIH researchers?

"The purpose is to create a forum that both allows scientists at all levels to advise policy development and promotes cross-fertilization of research insights and collaboration across institutes," Liotta wrote in a column in the first-ever edition of the *Catalyst*. "Our goal: Extend the spirit of the NIH Research Festival throughout the year." Speaking of which...

The NIH Research Festival (<https://researchfestival.nih.gov>). If you wanted to be surrounded by potential collaborators from all across the NIH, perhaps the single best event to attend is the NIH Research Festival, which now takes place every year in September. The event, which began in 1986 as "Research Day," was the brainchild of former National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR) Scientific Director **Abner Notkins** (<https://irp.nih.gov/pi/abner-notkins>), who noticed that he met more of his IRP colleagues while attending international meetings in Europe than he had during the course of his lab work on the NIH campus.

"Each of the institutes was viewed as a self-contained unit which stood alone, like a silo," Notkins said. Working with **Lois Salzman**, then a special assistant to the director of NIDCR's Division of Intramural Research and now deceased, Notkins set out to create an event that would break down those barriers and galvanize collaboration. Since then, the Research Festival has become a multiday affair featuring dozens of talks on a variety of topics, numerous exhibits and demonstrations, and hundreds of posters grouped by the same Scientific Focus Area used on the IRP website, making it simple to locate colleagues with similar interests.

The Wednesday Afternoon Lecture Series (<https://oir.nih.gov/wals>). NIH's Wednesday Afternoon Lecture Series ("WALS" for short) is the best-known lecture series at the NIH. Initiated in October 1994, the talks occur on most Wednesdays from September through June and feature prominent researchers in a variety of fields, all of whom are nominated by members of the NIH community. Each talk is followed by a reception (sponsored by the Foundation for Advanced Education in the Sciences) in the NIH Library, giving researchers from all corners of the NIH an opportunity to mingle and converse about both the speaker's work and their own.

"WALS is not only about gaining a broad perspective on science but also [about] the idea of finding and developing ideas and identifying potential collaborators," said Wyatt.

Collaborative Research Exchange (CREx) (<https://nih.scientist.com>). CREx is an online research marketplace in which one can identify the capabilities of thousands of external vendors and more than 100 NIH cores. In addition to providing information about shared resources, this trans-NIH collaborative provides lists of resources, technologies, and expertise offered by NIH labs, branches, and repositories; and contact information to encourage trans-NIH collaborative activities. For more information, go to <https://nih.scientist.com> (<https://nih.scientist.com>).

Of course, there are many ways of finding collaborators by chance—ranging from informal conversations with fellows and investigators in neighboring labs to interactions with colleagues at national and international meetings. But for those actively seeking collaborators, give one or more of the eight methods described in this article a try.