



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
OFFICE OF RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT
PROGRAM GUIDE 1200.20:
RESEARCH CAREER SCIENTIST PROGRAM

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RESEARCH CAREER SCIENTIST PROGRAM

This Program Guide replaces all prior official ORD guidance to the Research Career Scientist Award.

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RESEARCH CAREER SCIENTIST PROGRAM

1. PURPOSE

This Office of Research & Development (ORD) Program Guide provides guidelines for the Research Career Scientist (RCS) Program for the Brain, Behavioral and Mental Health (BBMH), Health Systems Research (HSR), Medical Health (Med Health), and Rehabilitation Research and Development and Translation (RRDT) Broad Portfolios. This Program Guide replaces prior “Handbooks” (as of March 15, 2016). Other relevant documents for the RCS program may include Request for Applications (RFAs), Frequently Asked Questions, and templates, available on the VA ORD website.

2. BACKGROUND

ORD recognizes the important contributions of non-clinician scientists to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) research program. As Principal Investigators of VA Merit Review awards, they make valuable contributions to our knowledge of understanding and treating disorders important to our Veteran population. In addition to scientific efforts, the intramural nature of the VA research program requires that Principal Investigators have a primary professional commitment to VA. Scientists show this commitment by appropriately acknowledging VA employment and research support, participating in local and national committee work, directing core facilities, teaching, mentoring, supervising shared resources, and other important research-related activities. In recognition of the overall contributions and professional commitment to the VA, ORD supports a career track for non-clinician scientists, through the RCS award mechanism.

3. SCOPE

Non-clinician scientists who have made extraordinary contributions beyond their individual research programs to VA research may be eligible for special designation as a Research Career Scientist (RCS) or Senior Research Career Scientist (SRCS). Applicants must be nominated by the local VA Medical Center and undergo a competitive peer review process. Funding is provided by the applicable ORD Broad Portfolio. SRCS and RCS (S/RCS) awards provide salary support for the term of the award and are renewable for 5 years (RCS) or 7 years (SRCS).

4. RCS AWARDS

a. **Research Career Scientist (RCS)**. This designation is awarded after competitive peer review to established, independent investigators who have

distinguished themselves through scientific achievements and contributions to the VA research program such as training, mentoring early career stage VA scientists (clinician and non-clinician), functioning as a resource for the research community, serving on VA research or other local or national committees, collaborating with VA clinician scientists, directing a VA core facility or other professional contributions.

RCS awards provide 5 years of research salary support. Renewal is competitive, contingent upon availability of funds, and continuation of scientific excellence evidenced by:

- i. Peer-reviewed research support;
- ii. Contributions to VA's research enterprise; and
- iii. Scientific distinction and national recognition.

It is expected that RCS applicants have the qualifications to be eligible for an appointment at the GS-14 level within the Federal Government and the title of Associate Professor at the affiliated university. The RCS award does not guarantee assignment to the GS-14 level. Similarly, there is no guarantee that reassignment to the GS-14 level will confer an RCS award. (See: VHA Handbook 1200.03, Centralized Positions of Research Scientists, GS-14 and above.) Please note that these are separate actions: Centralized Positions is a personnel action, RCS is a research award.

b. Senior Research Career Scientist (SRCS). The evaluation committee determines whether an applicant for a new RCS or a renewal merits SRCS designation; candidates may not be nominated for SRCS awards directly unless explicitly permitted in the application instructions of the RFA. The highest standards are applied when considering candidates for SRCS awards. They are typically highly productive leaders who have achieved international recognition for major accomplishments in their fields. In addition, their contributions to local and national VA programs through training and research service must be exemplary. Scientists selected for the SRCS award must have previously held an RCS award or have had continuous VA Merit Review funding for a minimum period of 6 years.

SRCS awards provide up to 7 years of research salary support. Renewal of an SRCS award is competitive, contingent upon availability of funds and continuation of scientific excellence evidenced by:

- i. Peer-reviewed research support;

- ii. Contributions to VA's research mission;
- iii. Scientific distinction with broad national and international recognition;
- iv. Leadership roles on scientific advisory panels; and
- v. National honors and awards.

It is expected that SRCS nominees will have the qualifications to be eligible for a GS-15 appointment within the Federal government and the title of Professor at the affiliated university. The SRCS award does not guarantee promotion to the GS-15 level. Similarly, there is no guarantee that promotion to the GS-15 level will confer a SRCS award. (See: VHA Handbook 1200.03, Centralized Positions of Research Scientists, GS-14 and Above.) Please note that these are separate actions: one is a personnel action, the other is a research award.

5. SALARY

S/RCS awardees receive VA salary support for the term of the award for research activities and therefore, cannot receive salary support for their role(s) in the budgets of concurrent VA Merit awards. VA salary support on other VA-ORD funded projects will be reduced from those projects' budgets, commensurate with the amount of effort supported by the RCS award. Salary support on other VA ORD funded projects will be pulled back by ORD Finance based on the amounts allocated in the project budgets for the awardee support, effective with the RCS award start date. It is the responsibility of the RCS awardee to communicate this information to the PI(s) of the project(s) on which they serve as paid Co-Investigators upon notification of Intent to Fund the RCS Award. If the S/RCS awardee holds significant administrative positions at the VA or university affiliate, salary support for the award will be reduced commensurate with the reduction of research time.

6. ELIGIBILITY

ORD Broad Portfolios may restrict the number of new and revised applications they will consider per VA medical facility per fiscal year; see the broad RFA for the Research Career Scientist Program for additional information. Potential applicants should consider the source of their VA funding to determine the most appropriate ORD Broad Portfolio to review the application and support the award. The following criteria define the basic eligibility requirements for a new RCS applicant:

- i. A minimum 5/8th VA-paid appointment at the time of application;
- ii. A competitively funded VA-ORD Merit Award from any of the Broad Portfolios, Actively Managed Portfolios, or ISRM Programs (includes competitively funded

Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI) Merit Awards – Program (QUE), Evidence-based Policy Evaluation Center (EBP), Partnered Evaluation Initiative (PEC), VISN Partnered Implementation Initiative (PII), Data Science Learning Health System (DSL)) at the time of application.

- iii. An active research program performed in VA space for at least the previous three (3) years. It is expected that RCS awardees will work to maintain active VA funding during the term of the RCS award.
- iv. National, peer reviewed research/QUERI support (e.g. VA, National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Science Foundation (NSF), or Department of Defense (DoD)) as a Principal Investigator (and not as Co-investigator) for at least a total of six (6) years. NOTE: This does not have to be six (6) consecutive years.
- v. The PD/PI must be current with all requirements related to intellectual property (VA invention documents and certifications), submission of annual progress reports (Research Performance Progress Reports (RPPRs)) and Final Reports, clinical trials registration, and clinical trials results reporting for existing and previous awards.

NOTE: Applications may be administratively withdrawn if any of the above criteria are not met.

7. APPLICATION PROCESS

Detailed instructions on the preparation and submission of an S/RCS application package can be found in the relevant RFA requested. Applications are due by the deadline specified for each Broad Portfolio in the RFA and in the submission calendar for the Office of Research and Development.

8. EVALUATION CRITERIA

The S/RCS award process is highly competitive, and application will be reviewed through a two-tier system. The first level of review will be performed by a Research Career Scientist review committee composed of scientists who have expertise in relevant scientific disciplines and current research areas. The purpose of the committee is to evaluate the merit of applications. The committee does not make funding decisions. The second level of review will be performed by program staff, based not only on considerations of merit (as judged by the committee), but also on the relevance of the proposed study to the mission, programs and priorities of VA-ORD. Final funding decisions are made at the discretion of the respective Portfolio Director and approved by the Investigators, Scientific Review, and Management Leadership Council, and are not subject to appeal.

Evaluations are based on performance and track record of the applicant in the following areas:

- a. **Research/QUERI Contributions:** RCS applicants' contributions to VA research are evaluated by considering their research history of publishing peer-reviewed research papers in high impact journals, peer-reviewed research funding, funding track

record as a principal investigator, membership on editorial or advisory boards for journals, etc. Reviewers look for examples of activities that had measurable impact on VA healthcare or advancing Veterans healthcare, such as adoption, implementation, or spread of research science into practice and/or policy; integration of findings into development of a new program or intervention; device development; citation or reference in practice or policy document; or other impact.

NOTE: *Relevance of applicant's activities to improving the quality of care for Veterans is considered essential.*

b. Publishing Contributions: Ratings for this domain can be influenced by the proportion of first and senior authorships over the reporting period, the proportion of higher quality journals, the author's h-index value and demonstrated impacts.

c. Collaborations: RCS applicants are evaluated for collaborations with VA and non-VA scientists and VA clinicians as evidenced by their joint peer-reviewed publications, sharing research techniques and/or special procedures, obtaining grants together, etc. **NOTE:** *Publications with VA clinician scientists are valued.*

d. Mentoring and Training: In addition to mentoring and training undergraduate/graduate students, post-doctoral fellows and early career VA scientists, RCS applicants are specifically evaluated for their contributions to clinical scientists' efforts in successfully obtaining grants, peer-reviewed publications, sharing special research technologies etc. Applicants are also evaluated for: their participation in teaching rounds for fellows, residents, and interns; providing updates on relevant topics to scientists; teaching at the affiliated university; and training investigators in special techniques. **NOTE:** *Support of VA-ORD's Career Development Program is especially valued.*

e. Administrative Service: Both local and national VA and non-VA research administration is evaluated including local VA medical center committee service, service at the affiliated university, national service, such as: ad hoc or regular membership on Merit Review subcommittees, NIH study sections, etc. **NOTE:** *Service to the local and national VA research program is considered essential. VA Service Contributions: Factors influencing the rating on this domain include not only the number of committees and advisory panels on which the investigator represents VA, but also the proportion of national to local memberships. Demands on time including the size and frequency of meetings and work effort involved, and documented impacts are also considered.*

f. Professional Stature: The RCS applicant's professional stature is evaluated based on membership on national scientific advisory or peer review committees and/or editorial boards of scientific and/or professional journals; invitations to speak or chair sessions at national or international scientific meetings; and letters of recommendation from national and international leaders in the applicant's field that consistently show continued and substantive research achievements and contributions in research collaborations, mentoring, training and professional service. **NOTE:** *The sources of Letters of Recommendation and how many are VA colleagues vs. non-VA scientists (i.e., more neutral letters) are considered an indicator of professional stature. Evidence of high professional stature alone is not sufficient to merit a Career Scientist award.*

9. MAINTAINING THE S/RCS AWARD

S/RCS awards are highly competitive and subject to periodic review as specified by the relevant ORD Broad Portfolio. Continuation of the award is contingent on the outcome of the periodic review in relation to the five criteria delineated in Section 8. The PD/PI must be current with all requirements related to intellectual property (VA invention documents and certifications), submission of annual progress reports (Research Performance Progress Reports (RPPRs)) and Final Reports, clinical trials registration, and clinical trials results reporting for existing and previous awards.

10. RENEWING THE S/RCS AWARD

The awardee's Research Office is responsible for submitting a timely renewal application, as salary support under the award may not be extended past the term. Renewal applications are due in ORD at least 6 months prior to the award end date; for example, if the award end date is September 30, the renewal application is due March 1. At the time of renewal, the S/RCS awardee is expected to have maintained a productive, funded, peer-reviewed research program and will be evaluated using the same criteria as a new applicant. If an application for award renewal is not approved, the applicant may receive salary from the applicant's funded Merit. It is recommended that a non-renewed applicant wait at least 6 months before submitting a revised application. **NOTE:** *Non-renewal decisions are not subject to appeal.*

11. CHANGES TO FUNDED S/RCS AWARDS

Requests for station transfers, changes in VA award percentage (eighths), sabbatical requests, and other administrative changes likely to impact the productivity of the S/RCS awardee should be submitted to the relevant RCS Program Manager at least 90 calendar days in advance of the requested change.

12. RCS PROGRAM CONTACTS. Inquiries about the RCS Program should be directed to should be directed to the RCS mailbox: rsc.materials@va.gov.

Information is also available on the ORD website at: <http://www.research.va.gov/>

APPROVED:

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