



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

As of August 1, 2016, the Research Career Scientist Handbooks and Notices for all ORD Services (Handbooks 1202.04 and 1203.03; VHA Notice 98-02) have been replaced with this Program Guide. This Program Guide replaces all prior official ORD guidance to the Research Career Scientist Award.

This Program Guide was issued on August 1, 2016 and expires July 31, 2019.

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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 Biomedical Laboratory Research and Development (BLR&D), Clinical Sciences Research and Development (CSR&D), Health Services Research and Development (HSR&D), and Rehabilitation Research and Development (RR&D) Services. 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 etc., 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 Research Service.

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 service; 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 promotion to the GS-14 level. Similarly, there is no guarantee that promotion 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: one is a personnel action, the other 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 service;
- 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 and therefore, they should not include salary support for their roles in the budgets of other VA Merit proposals. 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 Services may restrict the number of new and revised applications they will consider per VA medical facility per fiscal year; see the RFA for each Service for additional information. Potential applicants should consider the source of their VA funding to determine the most appropriate ORD Service 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. Principal Investigator on at least one active competitively funded VA Merit Review award, or serving in an equivalent leadership role for a competitively reviewed, Research Center or Program funded through ORD;
- iii. An active research program performed in VA-designated space for at least the previous 3 years; and

iv. National peer-reviewed research support (VA, National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Science Foundation (NSF), Department of Defense (DoD), etc.) as a Principal Investigator not as co-investigator, for at least 6 years. **NOTE:** *This does not have to be 6 consecutive years.*

NOTE: *Applications may be administratively withdrawn if any of the eligibility 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 Service 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. The evaluation committee for each Service reviews new applications, reviews renewal applications, and makes funding recommendations to the Service Director. Decisions made by the Service Director are not subject to appeal. Evaluations are based on performance and track record of the applicant in the following areas:

a. Research Contributions. Reviewers evaluate the RCS nominee's contributions to VA research based on the nominee's history of peer-reviewed research funding as a Principal Investigator and resulting products: patents and significant contributions to the scientific literature. **NOTE:** Programmatic relevance of the nominee's research to the Service's mission, goals and priority areas is considered essential.

b. VA Collaborations. Reviewers evaluate the RCS nominee's collaborations with VA clinicians and other VA staff as evidenced by joint peer-reviewed publications, sharing research techniques and/or special procedures, or obtaining research funding. Reviewers look for examples of activities that had measurable impact on advancing Veterans' health care, 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 nominee's activities to improving the quality of care for Veterans is considered essential.

c. Mentoring and Training. Reviewers evaluate the RCS nominee's mentoring and training of undergraduate/graduate students, post-doctoral fellows and early career VA scientists, and specifically the nominee's contributions to clinical scientists' efforts in successfully obtaining awards/grants, publishing peer-reviewed papers, and other

indicators of mentees' productivity. Reviewers also consider the nominee's participation in teaching rounds for fellows, residents, and interns; providing updates on relevant topics to scientists; teaching; and training investigators in special techniques. **NOTE:** Support of the Service's capacity building programs is especially valued.

d. Administrative Service. Reviewers evaluate the RCS nominee's local and national VA and non-VA research administration activities including local VA Medical Center committee service, such as the Research and Development Committee, Institutional Review Board (IRB), Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC), or Subcommittee on Research Safety. Reviewers also consider research-related service at the national level such as *ad hoc* or regular membership on VA Merit Review subcommittees, NIH study sections, or other national peer review groups and service on committees at the affiliated university, such as faculty recruitment or promotion and tenure committees. **NOTE:** Service to the local and national VA research program is considered essential.

e. Professional Stature. Reviewers evaluate the RCS nominee's professional stature based on membership on national scientific advisory or peer review committees and/or editorial boards of scientific journals; invitations to speak or chair sessions at national or international scientific meetings; academic promotions or honors at the affiliated university; and letters of recommendation from national and international leaders in the nominee's field that consistently show continued and substantive research achievements and contributions in research collaborations.

9. MAINTAINING THE S/RCS AWARD

S/RCS awards are highly competitive and subject to periodic review as specified by the relevant ORD Service. Continuation of the award is contingent on the outcome of the periodic review in relation to the five criteria delineated in Section 8.

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 the appropriate ORD Service contact listed below.

- a. BLR&D & CSR&D: rsc.materials@va.gov
- b. RR&D: rrdreviews@va.gov
- c. HSR&D: vhacoscirev@va.gov

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

APPROVED:



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