

Dear Board Member -

In response to my recent analysis of the withdrawal of NIH funding from S-K, you raised several issues, which warrant reply:

Board Member: What is clear is that SKERI has changed its priorities. These changes resulted in the departure of many researchers and a loss of funding of the projects those PIs had. Your analysis shows this very clearly. What is less clear is how well SKERI can rebuild with its new priorities. While it is true that the best single predictor of the future is the past, as with the stock market, past performance is no guarantee of future performance. Past “collapse” does not guarantee future decline. Your analysis shows the past very well; however, it does not predict the future. Nor does it indicate the correctness or incorrectness of the policy changes which you disagree with.

JMM: As my signature line suggests (and since you mention the stock market), I understand and accept the arguments made by Nassim Taleb ("Black Swan", "Antifragile") against relying on projections. It is best to focus on the present, where one can actually see what one is talking about, and mostly use predictions, as a scientist would, to test one's ideas. Three years ago, Alan Scott & I distributed the "Last 10 Years" chronicle (with which you are, no doubt, familiar), analyzing the institute's mismanagement and backward-looking vision, and

predicting that, absent dramatic changes in leadership, it risked collapse. The data I presented should be considered confirmation of that prediction.

Board Member: UC Berkeley and SKERI are not comparable. Since SKERI is limiting its priorities to binocular vision, eye movements, strabismus, amblyopia, low vision and blindness a comparison to the full range of topics covered by a major university may not be appropriate.

JMM: Whereas I plotted all NIH grants at S-K, I plotted only NEI grants at UCB, so the comparison was, roughly, NIH funding of the entire S-K Institute against that of the UCB Optometry and Vision Science Department, which has much the same range of interests as S-K, even under our "new priorities". What remains, then, is quite comparable: UCB and S-K funding track closely for many years, until 2009, when UCB jumps up as they take advantage of new opportunities, and S-K dives towards zero.

If binocular vision, eye movements and strabismus really were among S-K's new priorities, as your cited boilerplate claims, then four fully-functioning, funded, and expensively outfitted eye movement physiology labs would not have been shut down, and the only S-K project addressing eye muscle disorders in strabismus would not have been cut off from S-K support. You are mistaking PR for reality.

Board Member: There are clear shifts in NIH/NEI priorities. Having been on the study sections, I can assure you that low vision is not high on the priority list of those outside the area. Therefore, examining only NIH grants may not be appropriate as there are other funding sources available to SKERI, e.g., NIDRR and DoD. These other sources are much more interested in the current aims of SKERI. They have funded SKERI well in the past and continue to do so. To the best of my knowledge they have not shown the same declines.

JMM: These funding sources are equally available to others, including our colleagues at UCB. Do you have evidence that such "alternative" funding has even begun to fill the NIH funding gap at S-K, or at least not declined along with NIH funding, or is that just something you'd like to believe?

Board Member: A critical measure which you do not examine is the number of grants or dollar value of those grants per investigator. If SKERI can maintain its past performance in this regard there is a reasonable chance that it can regain its footing with its new priorities.

JMM: Without teaching or clinical work to fall back on, S-K researchers have typically run multiple grants (as have UCB Optometry and Vision Science researchers). But it is fantasy to propose returning S-K to fiscal health by whipping its decimated population of fundable scientists (now laboring at an institute that has lost its training and

core grants, senior administrators, major capital facilities, and is without effective leadership) into running even more simultaneous projects.

Board Member: I must confess that it amazes me that you continue to be so interested in SKERI and its future. However, I do recall from our days on the ARVO Program Committee that you are a passionate person.

JMM: My 30-year career investment at S-K would seem to qualify me as an interested party.

- Joel

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"If you see fraud and don't say fraud you are a fraud"
[Nassim Nicholas Taleb, 2012]