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On behalf of the
Association of American Universities

For the National Institutes of Health
Town Hall Meeting on
Ruth Kirschstein National Research Service Awards (NRSA)

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Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this town hall meeting regarding the Ruth
Kirschstein National Research Service Awards (NRSA). I speak to you today, wearing
two complementary hats -- one as the representative of the Association of American
Universities (AAU); the other as a longtime NIH grantee on both research and training
grants.

Let me begin on a more personal level, that is, by describing my experience with NIH
and the critical support it provides for training future research scientists. My name is
Linda Dykstra, and I am the Dean of the Graduate School and a professor in the
Departments of Psychology, Pharmacology, and Neurobiology at the University of North
Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am particularly honored to speak at this NIH town meeting, as
it gives me an opportunity to express my appreciation to NIH for its ongoing support of
research within my own laboratory. Indeed, my first R01, awarded in 1975, is now in its
29th year and was recently continued for five additional years.
In addition to being the recipient of long-term support from NIH for basic research in the pharmacological and behavioral sciences, I am currently the principal investigator (PI) on an NIGMS Bridges Program, as well as the PI on an NIDA training grant currently in its 16th year of support. I should also note that I have served as the research mentor for numerous pre-doctoral students, who have received individual NRSA awards. As a result of these experiences, I am very familiar with the current NRSA formula for funding tuition and the consequences of making changes.

The other hat that I wear today derives from my role within the Association of American Universities, as current President of the Association of Graduate Schools (AGS), which is an organization of graduate deans from AAU universities. AAU is an organization of 62 leading public and private research universities in the United States and Canada, including the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. AAU member institutions perform nearly 60 percent of federally funded university-based research and award nearly half of all U.S. Ph.D. degrees. These institutions have considerable firsthand experience about the issues being discussed today because they manage and provide support for a large number of NRSA training programs. For example, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill currently holds 50 NRSA training grants, supporting 183 pre-doctoral fellows and 149 postdoctoral fellows. Many other AAU universities have a similar profile of training grants; some support even larger numbers. I believe I speak for all AAU institutions in expressing great appreciation for the Ruth Kirschstein Awards and the central role they play in educating and training future biomedical and behavioral research scientists. These grants enable institutions across the country to train more students than they could otherwise support from their own resources alone.

I am grateful, both personally and on behalf of AAU, for the opportunity to offer the following views.

Graduate and postdoctoral education programs in the United States are respected and emulated worldwide, and they attract exceptionally talented students. Our nation's system of combining graduate education with cutting-edge research strengthens both the research
and education programs of our universities: the research training that graduate students receive enriches their graduate education, and the direct involvement of these talented students in research enhances the vigor and creativity of the entire research enterprise. From this strong base of education, NIH broadens and deepens the research expertise of thousands of talented individuals through the Ruth Kirschstein NRSA program. This program has played a key role in making possible the preeminence of biomedical research and training in this country. I should also note that it has an exceptional success rate in terms of degree completion. A recent study indicated that NIH-supported training grants and individual NRSA fellowships boast a 76 percent Ph.D. completion rate within five years. I know of no other program that comes even close to that success rate.

Unfortunately, we are not here today to discuss the merits, or indeed, the compelling need to expand training programs such as those at NIH. Rather, NIH is hosting this forum because federal support for biomedical research and training has declined. This decline undermines the biomedical research capacity and workforce expansion brought online during the doubling of the NIH’s budget. In the past two years, there has been a dramatic shift in how our nation supports biomedical research. During the budget doubling, NIH’s mission and research opportunities directed its budget; now the budget is dictating NIH’s mission and the opportunities that can be pursued.

The unfortunate consequence of declining resources for NIH is that there is no possible policy decision that avoids a regrettable outcome. Given current funding projections, NIH must either cut the number of Kirschstein Awards made annually or shift a greater proportion of costs to the institutions that educate these students. It is very difficult for AAU, and for me as a graduate dean, to take a stance that would reduce the number of exceptional students that go on to become our nation’s much-needed research scientists. Yet, declining resources force AAU member institutions and their leaders to consider the impact that declining support has on the institutions that are charged with this training mission.
It has long been AAU's view that the soundest policy for NIH, or for that matter any federal agency that provides graduate and postdoctoral traineeships, is to meet the full costs of student support – an adequate stipend and full payment of tuition and fees. This was in fact the policy for the NIH traineeship program for many years. However, NIH traineeships, as well as other federal research and education programs, have gradually shifted an increasingly larger share of program costs to universities. This, in turn, has reduced institutional resources for other university research and education missions.

NIH outlined three policy options in the notice for today's meeting. Option one applies the current tuition formula and adds a new ceiling on the amount of tuition reimbursement. Option two employs the approach used by the National Science Foundation, which replaces the current tuition formula with a fixed tuition allowance for each grantee institution. Option three retains the current policy, which provides for each trainee the sum of $3,000 plus 60 percent of the tuition in excess of $3,000, and it assumes that the number of NRSA trainees and funded training programs will likely be reduced in light of the current fiscal outlook for NIH.

Policy options one and two would effectively cap the amount of tuition funding included in Kirschstein Awards and shift the costs from NIH to institutional awardees. These tuition funds must be made up from other sources. Capping the amount of tuition reimbursement would force research institutions to divert funding from other important activities, such as support for new investigators, the purchase of needed research equipment and supplies, and the construction and maintenance of research facilities. A cap on tuition reimbursement may actually bar some high-quality programs from accepting Kirschstein Awards if they are unable to absorb the associated cost shifting. Indeed, such cost shifting has already begun in the wake of NIH’s recent announcement that it will freeze tuition expenses on competing renewals of T32 awards in FY2006.

For these reasons, and in full recognition of the fiscal pressures and challenges faced by NIH, AAU strongly urges that NIH maintain its current Kirschstein Award tuition reimbursement policy. The current policy is a sound compromise -- between NIH
meeting the full costs of student support and excessive cost shifting to universities -- that was made years ago when NIH faced a similar funding outlook. It should not be dismantled as a response to declining resources.

We understand that, in the absence of adequate funding, maintaining the current policy means that there will be fewer training opportunities for future biomedical researchers. This is very regrettable, but we believe this is the most responsible way to manage the consequences of declining support for the nation’s biomedical research enterprise.

Within the U.S. biomedical research enterprise, NIH has the primary responsibility for supporting the training of the thousands of biomedical researchers that the academic, industrial, and government sectors will need in coming years. AAU believes that the American people support NIH and its mission and are willing to provide the resources necessary for NIH to fulfill its mission. It is truly unfortunate that NIH has been forced into this policy conundrum.

AAU will continue to urge Congress and the Administration to re-examine current NIH funding decisions so that the gains made possible by the NIH doubling are not reversed and our nation's exceptional biomedical science capacity will not be dismantled. Until such time that there is once again a favorable funding climate for NIH-supported research and training, AAU believes NIH should maintain current policy and scale the size of the Kirschstein program to the resources available.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer AAU’s views on this important matter.