Statement by the Association of American Universities
For the National Institutes of Health
Town Hall Meeting on
Kirschstein National Research Service Awards (NRSA)

This statement presents the views of the Association of American Universities (AAU) on proposals to modify the current funding formula for tuition reimbursement on research training grants and fellowships in the biomedical sciences. AAU comprises 60 U.S. and two Canadian research universities. Our member institutions perform nearly 60% of federally funded university-based research and award nearly half of all U.S. Ph.D. degrees in engineering and the sciences. AAU and its members are able to speak from considerable first-hand experience about the issues to be discussed in NIH’s November 30 Town Hall Meeting, and we are grateful for the opportunity to offer the following observations.

NIH is holding this meeting to discuss how to manage our nation’s declining support for biomedical research training. NIH is wrestling with the consequences of policy and funding decisions that have been made by the Administration and Congress. Those decisions have led to cuts to the biomedical research capacity and manpower brought online during the doubling of NIH’s budget. In the past two years we have made a dramatic shift in how our nation supports biomedical research: during the doubling, NIH’s mission and research opportunity dictated its budget; now the budget is dictating NIH’s mission and the opportunities that can be pursued. AAU urges Congress and the Administration to re-examine current policy lest the research gains made possible by the NIH doubling be reversed.

The other unfortunate reality associated with declining resources for NIH research and training is that there is no possible policy decision that avoids a regrettable outcome. Given current funding, NIH must either cut the number of Kirschstein Awards made annually, or shift a greater proportion of the costs associated with the current number of awards to the institutions that educate these students. Policy options 1 and 2 as described in the meeting notice would effectively cap the amount of tuition funding accompanying Kirschstein Awards. These tuition funds must be made up from other sources; capping the awards would force research institutions to divert funding away from the support of new investigators, the purchase of needed equipment and research supplies, and the maintenance of laboratory infrastructure. Indeed, 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.

Caps on tuition payments may actually bar some high-quality programs from accepting Kirschstein Awards if they are unable to absorb the associated cost-shifting. We urge NIH to take note of the reservations expressed by the Council on Governmental Relations on this matter as well.

For these reasons, and in full recognition of the pressures and challenges faced by NIH, AAU advocates that NIH maintain current program policy. The current traineeship policy is sound and should not be dismantled as a response to declining resources. Thus, the only responsible approach is to scale the size of the program to the available resources. We understand that, in the absence of adequate funding, maintaining the current policy necessarily means fewer training opportunities for future biomedical researchers. This is regrettable, but it is the only reasonable way to manage the consequences of declining support for our nation’s eroding biomedical research enterprise.

Only NIH has the capacity to support the training of the thousands of biomedical researchers that U.S. academe, industry and government will need in coming years. AAU believes that the American people support NIH and its mission and are willing to provide the resources to maintain it. It is truly unfortunate that NIH has been forced into this policy conundrum. Thank you for the opportunity to offer our views.

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