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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION,
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6300

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June 11, 2024

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

The Honorable Monica Bertagnolli
Director
National Institutes of Health
900 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20892

Director Bertagnolli:

According to a recent report from the Wall Street Journal, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is engaged in an ongoing effort to push Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)-based initiatives in our nation's best biomedical research programs. I write to express significant concerns about these efforts and ask for clarity on their reach and impact for the hiring of faculty at our nation's best medical schools.

According to the Wall Street Journal, the NIH's Faculty Institutional Recruitment for Sustainable Transformation (FIRST) program "requires all grant recipients to use 'diversity statements' for their newly funded hires."¹ Rubrics created by certain schools in connection with this program reportedly rely on a rubric that "penalizes job candidates for espousing colorblind equality and gives low scores to those who say they intend to 'treat everyone the same'" and that "docks candidates who express skepticism about the practice of dividing students and faculty into racially segregated 'affinity groups.'"² Based on reporting, it appears NIH has allowed FIRST grant recipients to pursue these initiatives using taxpayer dollars. It is unclear how NIH conducts program oversight or whether it has raised any concerns about the use of these rubrics in connection with the FIRST program.

According to the same report, in adopting the NIH's program, another school reportedly "required search committee members to attend an 'equity-minded hiring' seminar" and focused a handout on "redefining the concept of 'merit' by incorporating such 'equity-minded' indicators as an

¹ John Sailer, *The NIH Sacrifices Scientific Rigor for DEI*, THE WALL ST. J. (Mar. 12, 2024), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-nih-sacrifices-scientific-rigor-for-dei-f828a6c7>.

² *Id.*

education in social justice and ‘experience acting as an equity advocate.’”³ One school’s NIH grant progress report reportedly described a rubric weighing “commitment to diversity” on even par with “research potential,” even though the focus of the school’s program was actually “focused on cancer, cardiovascular health and neuroscience.”⁴

If accurate, this reporting is extremely concerning. Congress entrusts the NIH with administering federal grant programs in order to support medical schools and other research institutions in hiring the best medical faculty, scientists, and researchers and in producing the best cutting-edge biomedical research in the world. I support having more diverse biomedical research, and I have previously championed bipartisan legislation to support health disparities research and opportunities for researchers from underrepresented populations. However, allowing schools to use taxpayer dollars to support the adoption of “woke” hiring criteria pushed by progressive political activists goes far beyond bipartisan congressional intent.

Further, the FIRST program’s website lists some medical centers and schools of medicine among its list of grant recipients.⁵ While the reported DEI-based hiring criteria apply to research faculty hired under the FIRST program, I have concerns about the broader precedent that this program may set. The hiring criteria reportedly associated with this program have no place in our nation’s medical schools. As you know, there is currently a growing shortage of physicians in the United States. According to a troubling report issued in March by the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), the United States is projected to see a “shortage of between 20,200 and 40,400 primary care physicians” and a “shortage of between 10,100 and 19,900 physicians” for surgical specialties by the year 2036.⁶ These estimates are staggering, and risk growing further in coming years. It is essential that we as a nation do all that we can to support our vibrant medical research community and encourage our nation’s best and brightest to pursue careers in medicine regardless of race or ethnicity.

I understand that the FIRST program was established in 2020, which predated your tenure at NIH.⁷ However, in order for this Committee to better assess how NIH continues to allocate federal dollars to this program, how it engages in program integrity, and in order to ensure that NIH is fulfilling its statutory responsibilities to support medical research and the medical community for all, please respond to the following, on a question-by-question basis, no later than June 25, 2024.

1. Please describe all efforts that NIH is actively pursuing, and plans to pursue, to support the recruitment and hiring of additional medical professionals in light of the growing physician shortage in the United States.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ FACULTY INSTITUTIONAL RECRUITMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION (FIRST), <https://commonfund.nih.gov/first/fundedresearch>.

⁶ ASSOC. OF AM. MED. COLL., THE COMPLEXITIES OF PHYSICIAN SUPPLY AND DEMAND: PROJECTIONS FROM 2021 TO 2036 6, 8 (2024), <https://www.aamc.org/media/75231/download?attachment>.

⁷ John Sailer, *How the NIH Pushes DEI On Scientists*, THE WALL ST. J. (Mar. 1, 2023), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/nih-national-institutes-health-dei-medical-research-graduate-school-diversity-statement-woke-critical-race-theory-crt-62ccfba9>.

2. Please produce all records relating to NIH's development of the FIRST program, including its goals, objectives, and administration.
3. Please produce copies of all grant criteria that the NIH provides to schools interested in pursuing funding under the FIRST program, and provide all related records.
4. Please produce all FIRST grant proposals, as well as records relating to NIH's evaluation of and funding award decisions made in response to proposals for funding under the FIRST program.
5. Please describe all NIH oversight efforts related to the FIRST program. In addition, please produce copies of all progress reports and other records relating to implementation of the FIRST program submitted by schools to NIH from January 1, 2020 to present.

Sincerely,

Bill Cassidy, M.D.

Bill Cassidy, M.D.
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Health,
Education, Labor, and Pensions