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Council of Graduate Schools Statement for NIH Town Hall Meeting, November 30, 2005

The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the proposed fiscal policy changes governing the Ruth L. Kirschstein National Research Service Awards (NRSA). CGS is an organization of over 450 institutions of higher education engaged in graduate education, research and the preparation of candidates for advanced degrees. Our member institutions award approximately 90% of the doctoral degrees and over 75% of the master's degrees in the U.S. Over 95% of the top 100 institutions of higher education ranked by NIH awards are CGS members and these institutions received over \$500 million in NRSA training grants in fiscal year 2004.

The NRSA training grants program is greatly valued by many CGS member institutions and funding provided through these awards is crucial to training future U.S. scientists in critical fields of national need. It is unfortunate that NIH faces budget constraints at the very time that we should be making increased investments in our scientific expertise and development of the highly skilled workforce necessary to compete effectively in the 21st century global economy.

The NIH announcement includes three options for responding to the agency's anticipated budget shortfalls. Options one and two propose imposing a ceiling on tuition and fees or establishing a fixed amount of tuition and fees and option three would not change the current funding formula but would likely result in a reduction of NRSA trainees and funded training programs. These proposed options necessitate making a decision between reducing the number of NRSA awards or enacting new policies with the potential of disproportionately impacting some universities.

We recognize that none of the proposed options are ideal and we suggest pursuing a strategy that will minimize disruptions in the program, impacts all institutions and programs in as equitable a manner as possible and that provides institutions and programs with some choice in responding to the anticipated budget shortfalls in the program. The Council of Graduate Schools recommends the following principles be used to guide decision making with regard to the NRSA awards:

- Developing and supporting future scientists, particularly biomedical researchers as a national priority to maintain and enhance U.S. competitiveness in the global economy.
- Sustaining the pipeline of biomedical scientists and preserving as many NRSA positions as possible
- Protecting stipend levels for trainees
- Encouraging local, campus-based solutions to escalating fees and costs
- Treating public and private institutions impartially

Given the size and diversity of institutions and graduate programs represented in the Council of Graduate Schools membership, there are many points of view as to how to address the current budget situation at NIH.

The following preferences and modifications were among those suggested for consideration:

- Some CGS member institutions expressed support for Option #2, the NSF model now in use, as this model would permit devising local, campus based solutions to increasing fees and tuition costs and would avoid the reduction of awards as this is not in the long term interest of science.
- Other CGS members suggested retaining the current funding formula (Option #3) but devising a method to cut training slots in a manner that recognizes that larger training programs may be better able to handle the loss of slots than smaller programs.

While the current fiscal climate necessitates consideration of cost cutting measures, we urge NIH to consider how changes made to the NRSA awards now can be done in a way to set the stage for a longer term effort to increase support for the program in the years ahead and to position the program as a vital component of a U.S. strategy to maintain our leadership in science and research.

Thank you for the opportunity to share CGS's views on this important policy matter.

November 21, 2005

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