WHITMAN-WALKER Institute

Mailing Address:
Whitman-Walker at LIZ
1377 R Street, NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20009

April 23, 2021

SUBMITTED ELECTRONICALLY

Re: **(NOT-OD-21-066), RFI Inviting Comments and Suggestions to Advance and Strengthen Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the Biomedical Research Workforce and Advance Health Disparities and Health Equity Research**

Dear Sir or Madam:

Whitman-Walker Institute is pleased to submit these comments in response to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) request for information (RFI) to advance racial equity, diversity, and inclusion in the biomedical research workforce and advance health disparities and health equity research.

Interest and Expertise of Whitman-Walker: Whitman-Walker Institute conducts research, advocates for just and inclusive policies, and engages in clinical and community education to advance the health and wellness of communities of LGBTQ people and people living with HIV. Institute researchers, educators and policy advocates work closely with the over 200 Whitman-Walker Health providers to enhance the impact of their healthcare delivery and to ensure that direct health care, research, education, and public policy mutually reinforce each other. The Institute's large and growing Research Department currently has more than 2,500 participants in 40+ active studies. Recent research projects include collaborations with several other large LGBTQ-focused health centers to identify and address the health needs of marginalized communities.

New and existing partnerships:

In alignment with President Biden's whole of government approach, we recommend that the NIH develop partnerships with the National Science Foundation (NSF) and U.S. Department of Education (ED) to implement research, education, and training programs to encourage participation in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) by Black students.

Early in their lives, Black children are told in a myriad of ways that they cannot do STEM. Due to the history of racial bias in many American institutions, there is a generational resistance when Black children enter STEM. For example, many young Black students are questioned when entering STEM. This messaging can come from a lot of places, but particularly from teachers. This can prevent Black children who from an early age, may have received many subtle signals that they do not belong, from pursuing education in STEM.

The way that science is taught in schools often overlooks the contributions and accomplishments of Black scientists. A majority of the instruction on the history of science is taught on white scientists, with much less content on Black scientists. The NIH can improve the diversity of its workforce by teaching about the achievements of Black scientists as one of the ways to ensure that Black children know that science is relevant to non-white students. It is

important that this instruction be incorporated year-round and not just during Black History Month.

Partnerships with NSF and ED should provide education and training for teachers who teach STEM or biomedical-related subjects. We recommend that this training include education on understanding implicit bias, its sources, and tactics for interrupting it. We also support training on how the development of science relates to the development of racial politics. For example: we all know that while Watson and Crick are credited with the discovery of the structure of DNA. We do not often learn that they were proponents of eugenics[1] and that their colleague Rosalind Franklin's contributions to the discovery are often overlooked.[2] Teaching the history of science's relationship to racial politics is a way to demonstrate the interconnectedness between social and cultural norms and the history of the scientific process. This can help students understand the opportunities for them to contribute to STEM and social and cultural advancements in our society.

These partnerships and collaborations should be with educators and students in elementary, middle and high school. Interventions at the point of HBCUs are too late. All students benefit from early training in STEM. Creating more programming for elementary, middle, and high school students and educators will be helpful to reach students who need extra support to overcome barriers to entry.

Additionally, the NIH can partner with organizations that currently train in racial equity to incorporate scientific history in their trainings. Enhancing partnerships and collaborations between NIH researchers and those who do racial equity work can help to improve the culture of inclusion in NIH funded projects and programs.

Factors that present obstacles to training, mentoring, or career path:

We identify that the NIH can cultivate more opportunities for students in undergraduate, master, and doctorate level programs to engage in NIH research through expanding existing programming to be inclusive of part-time students. The challenges of being Black in academia stem from both the aforementioned dominant cultural narratives that inform students' perceptions of their own innate capacity and from the lack of resources in Black communities to support nascent scholars. There are many Black scholars who cannot afford to enroll in programs full-time for a myriad of reasons. Adjusting programs to allow for part-time students can address structural barriers to access for Black scholars and enhance the diversity and inclusion of NIH's career development programs.

Barriers inhibiting recruitment and hiring, promotion, retention and tenure:

We recognize and support the current flexibility of panel reviews and lack of a strict requirement for researchers to hold PhD certifications. We also have the perception that many opportunities are directed towards people with terminal degrees. While reviewing panels

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[1] Julia Belluz, *DNA scientist James Watson has a remarkably long history of sexist, racist public comments*, VOX (January 15, 2019) *Accessed via* https://www.vox.com/2019/1/15/18182530/james-watson-racist; and Press Release, *Francis Crick's controversial archive on first public display*, WELLCOME INSTITUTE (March 30, 2003) *Accessed via* https://wellcome.org/press-release/francis-cricks-controversial-archive-first-public-display, ("Francis Crick has long been known to hold controversial views on eugenics.")

2 Historical Biographies, *James Watson, Francis Crick, Maurice Wilkins, and Rosalind Franklin*, SCIENCE HISTORY INSTITUTE, *Accessed via* https://www.sciencehistory.org/historical-profile/james-watson-francis-crick-maurice-wilkins-and-rosalind-franklin.

currently do not mandate the inclusion of a PhD level researcher as the principal investigator (PI), it is our impression that as applied, projects without a PhD as the PI are rarely funded.

Because of historical and structural barriers to education for Black people, a process that limits opportunities to those with PhDs is going to limit access for Black scholars. Black scholars experience systemic barriers at higher rates and may be compelled to enter the workforce earlier than their white peers. White scholars are more likely to have the resources to spend the extra years training to achieve a PhD before earning an income.

To promote more diversity of experience in the projects they fund, we recommend that NIH investigate the decision-making process of panel reviews. We recommend that NIH promote diversity in their awards by diversifying members of reviewing panels and training them to identify skills-based expertise and experience within the community and at community-serving organizations in addition to the more traditional academic measures and indicators of success and expertise. We identify that the NIH could undertake to establish minimum levels of racial, academic, and educational diversity on reviewing panels to incorporate a diversity of perspectives.

We recommend that the NIH undertake to expand access to funding historically marginalized communities by incorporating more flexibility for identifying relevant experience and expertise in research skills. Our researchers identify that valuing the time and experience of work in a community would help improve diversity as it expands access to resources for non-PhD researchers. In addition, all researchers conducting research on and with underrepresented communities should have experience with and expertise in those communities.

Respectfully submitted,

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