



Genetics Society of America

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John C. Wingfield, PhD
Assistant Director for Biological Sciences
National Science Foundation
4201 Wilson Boulevard, Room 605 N
Arlington, VA 22230

Dear Dr. Wingfield:

We are writing on behalf of the Genetics Society of America (GSA), a professional scientific society with more than 5,000 members worldwide working to deepen our understanding of the living world by advancing the field of genetics, from the molecular to the population level.

It has come to our attention that a policy or a practice of the National Science Foundation's (NSF's) Directorate for Biological Sciences is having an unintended effect on awarding Postdoctoral Research Fellowships in Biology (PRFB). As explained below, we believe that the requirement for postdoctoral applicants to change institutions from the university from which he or she received a PhD is unnecessarily restrictive. Indeed, within NSF, only the biological sciences postdoctoral program seems to mandate such a move. We are especially concerned with the impact that this practice has on members of groups traditionally underrepresented in scientific disciplines and on two-career couples.

The historic merit of this practice is easily understood. We all want to ensure that our trainees gain broad perspectives and experiences during their training—and avoid the “intellectual inbreeding” that could occur were an entire training experience to be conducted within a scientific silo.

However, there are many first-rate universities that offer a wide range of different training experiences. In our view, a person with a PhD from one department in such an institution could have as different an experience in another department as he or she would have by moving to a different institution. Likewise, larger institutions often have multiple colleges, such as Engineering versus Arts and Sciences, or even different professional schools, such as Public Health versus Arts and Sciences. In our experience, the training offered in such different venues within a large university can often fit the goal of diversification of training experience as thoroughly as forcing a change in institutions.

The current requirement is especially challenging for those earning their PhDs from universities that are geographically isolated, where any change in institution would require moving hundreds of miles. This can be a particular hardship on the many senior graduate students in committed relationships—including those with young families. The present practice would require one partner to disrupt their

own career path, which is often at a critical juncture, so that the other can compete for an NSF fellowship. We are also concerned about the impact on underrepresented minorities and others who may be especially likely to wish to remain in certain geographic regions or closer to family members.

We believe that a slight adjustment of the policy of diversification of training experience would enable individuals in such circumstances to advance their training rather than having to make compromises that limit their potential. While remaining vigilant regarding the importance of breadth of experience, we suggest allowance of exceptions where a change of department, college, professional school or institute within the same university would provide the desired breadth of training experience for a PhD scientist transitioning to a postdoctoral fellowship. Further, we suggest that the experience and judgment of those who serve on NSF review panels is more than adequate for exercising these judgments.

Thank you for considering this proposal.

Sincerely,



Vicki L. Chandler, PhD
President



Michael Lynch, PhD
Immediate Past President



Jasper Rine, PhD
Vice-President / President-Elect

cc: France A. Córdoba, PhD, Director, National Science Foundation
Cora B. Marrett, PhD, Deputy Director, National Science Foundation



Genetics Society of America

ABOUT GSA: Founded in 1931, the [Genetics Society of America](#) (GSA) is a professional scientific society with more than 5,000 members worldwide working to deepen our understanding of the living world by advancing the field of genetics, from the molecular to the population level. GSA promotes research and fosters communication through a number of GSA-sponsored conferences including regular meetings that focus on particular model organisms. GSA publishes two peer-edited scholarly journals: [GENETICS](#), which has published high quality original research across the breadth of the field since 1916, and [G3: Genes|Genomes|Genetics](#), an open-access journal launched in 2011 to disseminate high quality foundational research in genetics and genomics. The Society also has a deep commitment to education and fostering the next generation of scholars in the field. For more information about GSA, please visit www.genetics-gsa.org. Also follow GSA on Facebook at facebook.com/GeneticsGSA and on Twitter [@GeneticsGSA](https://twitter.com/GeneticsGSA).