

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

November 1, 2024

The Honorable Monica Bertagnolli, M.D.
Director
National Institutes of Health
9000 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20892

Re: National Institutes of Health (NIH) Common Fund's Faculty Institutional Recruitment for Sustainable Transformation (FIRST) Program Inquiry

Dear Director Bertagnolli,

We are writing to inquire about the use of taxpayer dollars to advance diversity-focused hiring practices at institutions of higher education (IHE) across the U.S. and to better understand the role that the NIH plays in these decisions.

Since the formation of the NIH in 1887, its primary mission is to “seek fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and the application of that knowledge to enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability.”¹

Unfortunately, over the last several years, through so-called diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, we have witnessed the infiltration of a radical and discriminatory political agenda into every corner of the federal government, academia, and countless other private organizations across the country. Compliance with these misguided principles results in the dereliction of the agency's foundational missions centered on merit and excellence in contrast to a system that advances the very practices it purportedly seeks to combat.

The NIH is certainly no exception to this radical agenda as, according to the NIH-Wide Strategic Plan for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility for FY23-27, it intends to allocate what is likely millions of taxpayer dollars to integrate DEI-related goals in “all aspects of its activities,” both internally and across the entire biomedical community.²

While we find the vast majority of this strategic plan troubling, given the consequences it could have on biomedical research, the FIRST Program stands out as compared to the rest. According to the program snapshot, it “aims to enhance and maintain cultures of inclusive excellence in the biomedical research community” with a stated goal of “providing evidence-backed strategies that significantly impact inclusive excellence within research environments and ultimately diversify the biomedical research workforce.”³ These objectives are achieved through the “hiring of faculty cohorts with demonstrated commitments to inclusion and diversity.”⁴ In other words, the NIH is prioritizing a discriminatory set of hiring practices across our nation's IHEs, the very purpose of which abandons the concepts of individual merit, with the taxpayers footing the bill.

¹ <https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/what-we-do/nih-almanac/about-nih#:~:text=NIH%20is%20the%20steward%20of,and%20reduce%20illness%20and%20disability.>

² <https://www.nih.gov/sites/default/files/about-nih/nih-wide-strategic-plan-deia-fy23-27.pdf>

³ <https://commonfund.nih.gov/FIRST>

⁴ <https://commonfund.nih.gov/FIRST/highlights/nih-first-awardees-announced>

Independent findings from earlier this year revealed that, in large part due to the FIRST Program, multiple IHEs have developed radical standards to assess a candidate's contributions to DEI.⁵⁶ Such standards reportedly go as far as to dictate lower scores for individuals who state an "intention to ignore the varying backgrounds of their students and treat everyone the same" or express skepticism on practices that divide faculty and students into "affinity groups" segregated by race.⁷ The NIH Program itself is limited to IHEs and faculty who demonstrate a strong commitment to promoting diversity and inclusive excellence and mandates that all FIRST faculty submit a statement to the grantee institution describing such a commitment.⁸ It is not only completely unacceptable for the federal government to administer a program that promotes a culture of divisiveness at our nation's brightest IHEs, but it is also unconstitutional, violating not only the Fifth Amendment to the United States Constitution but several civil rights statutes as well. While this may be simply business as usual under the Biden-Harris administration, we are no longer going to tolerate this behavior in our federally funded programs.

Fortunately, over the course of this year, multiple IHEs acknowledged the failure of DEI and its record of creating more divisiveness, notably the rise in antisemitism⁹, on our nation's campuses and have subsequently begun to roll back these radical initiatives.¹⁰ A few landmark examples include the University of North Carolina system's repealing of its systemwide DEI policy,¹¹ the Massachusetts Institute of Technology ending the use of diversity statements for faculty hiring,¹² and the University of Wyoming terminating its DEI Office.¹³ Despite these promising steps, the NIH continues to administer its FIRST Program and award funding to entities in states that banned public financial support for DEI initiatives. This is unacceptable, as the NIH is responsible for conducting research and taking steps to improve the overall quality of life for everyone as opposed to squandering taxpayer dollars on initiatives that further divide Americans based on physical and irrelevant characteristics.

Given all the foregoing, we are requesting answers to the following questions no later than December 1st, 2024.

1. To date, how much money has the NIH spent on diversity or inclusion initiatives?
 - a. Of this amount, how much has been allocated under the FIRST Program?
2. What are the specific metrics used and the methodology for choosing grant recipients in the FIRST Program?

⁵ https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-nih-sacrifices-scientific-rigor-for-dei-f828a6c7?mod=hp_trending_now_opn_pos2

⁶ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-diversity-policing-fails-science-equality-equity-education-texas-tech-job-candidates-interview-dei-pronouns-11675722169>

⁷ https://www.wsj.com/articles/nih-national-institutes-health-dei-medical-research-graduate-school-diversity-statement-woke-critical-race-theory-crt-62ccfba9?mod=article_inline

⁸ <https://commonfund.nih.gov/FIRST/faqs#:~:text=What%20do%20the,excellence%20and%20diversity.>

⁹ <https://thehill.com/opinion/education/4341008-campus-antisemitism-has-become-systemic-due-to-diversity-equity-and-inclusion/>

¹⁰ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brianbushard/2024/05/23/dei-bans-at-colleges-unc-becomes-latest-school-repealing-its-diversity-program-heres-a-full-list/>

¹¹ <https://apnews.com/article/north-carolina-diversity-dei-board-of-governors-dc23328c84b9005fc1e916164e44c3fa>

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/06/us/mit-diversity-statements-faculty-hiring.html>

¹³ <https://cowboystatedaily.com/2024/05/10/university-of-wyoming-will-eliminate-dei-office-keep-some-of-its-services/>

3. The FIRST Program seeks to “enhance diversity and inclusion among biomedical faculty” and “aims to transform culture by building a... community of scientists committed to inclusive excellence... through recruitment of a diverse group of faculty... and have demonstrated strong commitment to promoting diversity and inclusive excellence.” How does the NIH define the “diversity” and “inclusion” it seeks to promote?
4. What are NIH’s quantitative goals when it says it “aims to transform culture” in the aforementioned quote?
5. If the FIRST Program seeks to promote policies, practices, and procedures designed and implemented in relation to groups of differences like race, color, culture, ethnicity, gender identity, national origin, religion, or sexual orientation lines, how are these practices in compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964?
6. What does the NIH consider to be an acceptable diversity statement under the FIRST Program, and what must specifically be included in the statement’s contents?
7. Has the NIH reevaluated or planned to reexamine any elements of the FIRST Program, given the aforementioned changes at major IHEs across the country?

Sincerely,



Harriet M. Hageman
Member of Congress



Barry Moore
Member of Congress



Glenn Grothman
Member of Congress



Clay Higgins
Member of Congress



Andy Biggs
Member of Congress



Victoria Spartz
Member of Congress



Pete Stauber
Member of Congress



Matt Gaetz
Member of Congress