Letters

Biomedical Research: Support for Minorities

The letter "Equal opportunity in biomedical research" from J. N. Fain and R. H. Pointer (26 Apr., p. 413), notes that the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare is doing little with respect to training biomedical researchers from minority groups. In actuality, several programs of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) are devoted to increasing opportunities for minority persons to pursue biomedical research careers.

For example, the NIH Division of Research Resources funds the Minority Biomedical Support (MBS) program. Begun in June 1972 with a $2 million budget, MBS became the first federally supported program designed to bolster biomedical research capability in institutions of higher learning with predominately ethnic minority student bodies. During its first 2 years, MBS supported 763 students (including 648 at the prebaccalaureate level) and 398 faculty members.

The MBS program provides funds for a variety of biomedical research development purposes, including support of faculty release time (freeing faculty scientists for research by hiring additional teachers), research programs, salaries of research personnel, research resources, and consortia biomedical programs.

The program now encompasses 58 colleges and universities—45 black, 11 Spanish-speaking, 1 Hawaiian, and 1 American Indian. They are located in the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and 20 states. Grants totaling $8 million have been awarded to these institutions in fiscal year 1974.

In addition, the National Institute of General Medical Sciences funds the Minority Access to Research Careers (MARC) program. This is a fellowship-type program designed to support faculty members of minority institutions in the further development of their research skills. They serve under the tutelage of outstanding investigators at major centers of biomedical research.

These two programs have been well received by minority groups. They have begun to make a significant contribution toward alleviating the shortage of minority scientists referred to by Fain and Pointer. Since predoctoral grant support for minority persons is limited because few present MBS grantee institutions offer graduate programs, consideration is also being given to developing a program in the future that would allow minority students who begin their biomedical research training in the current MBS program to continue until they complete doctoral programs and become biomedical research investigators.

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Fain and Pointer comment on the lack of equal opportunity for minorities in biomedical research. It should be pointed out that NIH (National Institutes of Health) is doing something in the area of their concern, albeit rather modest. The NIH Minority Biomedical Support (MBS) program was launched by the General Research Support Branch (GRSB) of the Division of Research Resources in 1972. One of us (L.F.) serves as a member of the GRSB advisory committee and the other (J.J.) serves as program director of an MBS project.

The impact of the MBS program in terms of generating student interest in biomedical science and increasing biomedical research productivity by scientists at minority institutions has been highly significant. The Atlanta University Center can be used as an example. Here, since 1971, the number of scientists engaged in biomedical research has increased from 8 to 52; the number of papers presented and articles published has increased from 5 to 31; the number of undergraduate students receiving training in biomedical research has increased from 3 to 40, with 36 junior-level minority students from the center's undergraduate colleges and other institutions engaged in a full-time research training program during the summer months; and the number of graduate students engaged in biomedical research has increased from 35 to 75.

Further evidence of the impact and interest generated by the program in its short life-span is provided by the amount of student participation and the number of research reports contributed at the recently held (15–17 April) second annual MBS Biomedical Symposium sponsored by Xavier University in New Orleans. Student and faculty attendance at the 3-day symposium exceeded 400, and 128 research reports resulting from MBS-supported projects were presented by faculty, undergraduates, and graduate students. More than 50 primarily minority institutions were represented at this symposium.

An additional support program for minorities interested in biomedical careers is the Minority Access to Research Careers (MARC) program of the National Institute of General Medical Sciences. Provisions in this program include: (i) salary-matching predoctoral fellowships for faculty members from minority institutions to engage in study and research in a biomedical field; (ii) visiting scientist awards that enable a minority institution to bring to the campus, for 3 to 12 months, an outstanding scholar to assist in developing research and study areas in biomedical science; and (iii) research training grants that provide support for students engaged in doctoral study in minority schools.

These NIH programs, although relatively small in size and level of support, represent a good start toward increasing opportunities for minorities in the biomedical profession. However, in order to significantly improve the situation of minorities in biomedical science, more support is needed from NIH for the established programs, and new programs need to be generated in those components of NIH where meaningful minority programs do not currently exist.

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