



**Association of  
American Medical Colleges**  
655 K Street, N.W., Suite 100, Washington, D.C. 20001-2399  
T 202 828 0400 F 202 828 1125  
www.aamc.org

November 24, 2023

Office of the Director  
National Institutes of Health  
9000 Rockville Pike  
Bethesda, Maryland 20892

**Re: Request for Information- Inviting Comments and Suggestions on Updating the NIH Mission Statement (NOT-OD-23-163)**

*Submitted electronically at <https://rfi.grants.nih.gov/?s=64caaa8bb1112e46ad0a1d52>*

The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on a proposed update to the NIH mission statement.

The AAMC is a nonprofit association dedicated to improving the health of people everywhere through medical education, health care, medical research, and community collaborations. Its members are all 158 U.S. medical schools accredited by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education; 12 accredited Canadian medical schools; approximately 400 academic health systems and teaching hospitals, including Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers; and more than 70 academic societies. Through these institutions and organizations, the AAMC leads and serves America's medical schools, academic health systems and teaching hospitals, and the millions of individuals across academic medicine, including more than 193,000 full-time faculty members, 96,000 medical students, 153,000 resident physicians, and 60,000 graduate students and postdoctoral researchers in the biomedical sciences. Following a 2022 merger, the Alliance of Academic Health Centers and the Alliance of Academic Health Centers International broadened participation in the AAMC by U.S. and international academic health centers.

The AAMC strongly supports the proposed revision of the NIH mission statement and the efforts of the NIH to increase diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) within the biomedical research workforce. We also agree with the agency that “individuals with disabilities experience unique challenges in pursuing and maintaining biomedical research careers that may differ from the experiences of other underrepresented groups.”<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, we appreciate NIH's engagement with the disability community, as well as the development of the working group under the Advisory

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<sup>1</sup> ACD Working Group on Diversity, Subgroup on Individuals with Disabilities. Available at <https://acd.od.nih.gov/working-groups/disabilitiessubgroup.html>

Committee to the Director (ACD working group) to identify strategies and recommendations<sup>2</sup> specific to supporting researchers with disabilities.

Prior to this proposed revision, the NIH mission statement read as follows:

*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.*

The proposed change revises the language in accordance with the recommendations from the ACD working group to read:

*To seek fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and to apply that knowledge to optimize health and prevent or reduce illness for all people.*

Clarifying that NIH’s mission should not include “reducing disability” was a key conclusion of the ACD working group report, which found that the current mission statement “could be interpreted as perpetuating ableist beliefs that disabled people are flawed and need to be ‘fixed.’” The AAMC agrees with this finding, as well as statements from both NIH leadership<sup>3</sup> and the co-chairs of the ACD working group<sup>4</sup> that language matters, and it is important to consider how the current mission statement may impact both the science and the scientists supported by the NIH. From conversations with researchers in academic medicine who identify as part of the disability community, it is clear that this update to the mission statement is a welcome and significant change that will “acknowledge modern and community-centered views of disability.” The AAMC also finds the proposed language to be consistent with NIH’s agency-wide strategic plan<sup>5</sup> as well as the NIH plan for enhancing DEIA<sup>6</sup>.

We urge NIH to ensure that the revisions to the mission statement are only a step in addressing inclusivity and accessibility issues. As stated in one of the 10 key principles in the AAMC Center for Health Justice’s Principles of Trustworthiness, “without action, your organizational pledge is only performance.”<sup>7</sup> We similarly appreciate the comments of NIH Chief Officer for Scientific Diversity Marie Bernard, MD, who stated: “updating a mission statement is just one action an organization

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<sup>2</sup> Report, Advisory Committee to the Director Working Group on Diversity, Subgroup on Individuals with Disabilities. NIH, December 2022. Available at:

[https://acd.od.nih.gov/documents/presentations/12092022\\_WGD\\_Disabilities\\_Subgroup\\_Report.pdf](https://acd.od.nih.gov/documents/presentations/12092022_WGD_Disabilities_Subgroup_Report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Words Matter, Actions Have Impact: Updating the NIH Mission Statement. NIH Director’s Blog. Sept. 28, 2023. Available at:

<https://directorsblog.nih.gov/2023/09/28/words-matter-actions-have-impact-updating-the-nih-mission-statement/>

<sup>4</sup> Iezzoni LI, Swenor BK. Revising NIH’s Mission Statement to Remove Ableist Language. *JAMA*. Published online October 16, 2023. doi:10.1001/jama.2023.20123. Available at: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2810963>

<sup>5</sup> NIH-Wide Strategic Plan- Fiscal Years 2021-2025. Available at: <https://www.nih.gov/sites/default/files/about-nih/strategic-plan-fy2021-2025-508.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> NIH-Wide Strategic Plan for Diversity Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility- Fiscal Years 2023-2027. Available at: <https://www.nih.gov/sites/default/files/about-nih/nih-wide-strategic-plan-deia-fy23-27.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> AAMC Center for Health Justice Principles of Trustworthiness, available at: <https://www.aamchealthjustice.org/our-work/trustworthiness/trustworthiness-toolkit>

might take to foster disability equity and inclusion. Transformative change involves identifying and addressing systemic and structural factors that may hinder the participation of people with disabilities in science.<sup>8</sup>

We look forward to working with NIH as the agency implements additional recommendations of the ACD report<sup>2</sup> in support of increasing support for individuals with disabilities in the research workforce. The AAMC is actively working in support of many of these same goals, including integrating disability inclusion and equality into DEIA efforts, and looking at ways to improve and standardize data related to researchers with disabilities within academic medicine.

We would also like to again emphasize the importance of continued engagement with the disability community and including perspectives of individuals with disabilities in these efforts. Please feel free to contact me or my colleague Anurupa Dev, PhD, Director of Science Policy and Strategy ([adev@aamc.org](mailto:adev@aamc.org)) with any questions about these comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Heather H. Pierce". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Heather H. Pierce, JD, MPH  
Acting Chief Scientific Officer  
Senior Director for Science Policy and Regulatory Counsel

cc: David J. Skorton, MD, AAMC President and Chief Executive Officer

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<sup>8</sup> Marie A. Bernard. Share Your Thoughts on NIH's Mission Statement. (NIH, 2023). Available at: <https://diversity.nih.gov/blog/2023-10-11-share-your-thoughts-nih-mission-statement>