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January 20, 2006

Kathie Olsen, PhD
Deputy Director
The National Science Foundation
4201 Wilson Boulevard
Arlington, Virginia 22230

Dear Dr. Olsen:

Thank you for providing the National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) with an opportunity to comment on the National Science Foundation's Strategic Plan. The mission of the NPA is to advance the US research enterprise by maximizing the effectiveness of the research community and enhancing the quality of the postdoctoral experience for all participants. As the national voice for postdoctoral scholars, the NPA welcomes the opportunity to provide input on the NSF's Strategic Plan.

The NPA applauds the NSF for recognizing its role in developing the next generation of scientists and engineers and its position as a national leader in promoting programs that integrate research and education. The NPA agrees that it is through effective integration of research and education that the strategic goals of the NSF will be met, such as creating a diverse, competitive, and globally-engaged US S&E workforce.

Postdoctoral scholars perform a large portion of the basic S&E research in the US and while the inclusion of "Postdoctoral Programs" in Appendix B of the NSF Strategic Plan indicates that the NSF does recognize the importance of training support at that career level, there are no direct references to postdoctoral scholars in the NSF Strategic Plan. The NPA recommends that the language currently used to describe "education at all levels" and "through career development" be clarified to specifically include "postdoctoral scholars" and "training." While it is important to support programs that attract students to graduate S&E studies, it is equally, if not more, important to secure the investment made in these students by providing continuing programs and support as they transition through the postdoctoral training period and into early-career positions.

A strategy for integrating research and education is discussed on page 22 of the current plan. The NPA fully agrees with the NSF that reward systems to support teaching and mentoring can be a useful tool in ensuring that students and postdoctoral fellows are provided with the best education and training. However, the NPA recommends that the NSF include in its goals a commitment to developing specific mechanisms for implementation of these systems to ensure that NSF-funded educational and training programs do indeed provide such teaching and mentoring support. For example, the NSF Intra-agency

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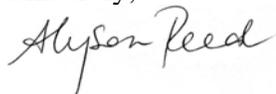
Working Group recommendation that a training plan be documented in research grants that include postdoctoral scholars, is consistent with this strategy.

Because the postdoctoral period is by nature one of training, it is a tactical time to cultivate the career development of postdoctoral scholars towards implementation of the long-term goals of the NSF Strategic Plan, such as the development of intellectual capital and innovative/interdisciplinary research programs. To optimize the career training of our future workforce, the NPA recommends that the NSF include in its Strategic Plan collaboration with professional associations, funding agencies, and other stakeholders to develop recommended practices for postdoctoral education/training programs.

Finally, before a Strategic Plan can be developed, sufficient data must be available from the prior planning period. While the NPA recognizes that data collection and reporting are statutory mandates, there are very few specifics included in this plan for ensuring that adequate data on the current and future S&E workforce are collected and reported. This is paramount to meeting the goals of the NSF priority area “Workforce for the 21st Century” (page 24), which cannot be achieved without adequate career progression and outcome data. Therefore, the NPA suggests that development of specific mechanisms for adequate data collection and reporting, especially as it pertains to postdoctoral scholars and their career development be included as a goal throughout all phases of the Strategic Plan.

In conclusion, the NPA appreciates the commitment of the NSF to the future S&E workforce and is hopeful that, in recognition of the critical and especially vulnerable position this facet of the workforce holds, the NSF will specifically incorporate plans to address postdoctoral scholar-specific training into this version of the Strategic Plan.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alyson Reed".

Executive Director