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The Unrecognized Magnitude of the Lack of NIH RO1 Funding to Minority Investigators

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Despite the efforts of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to encourage racial diversity in science and increase training and funding opportunities to minority institutions, there continues to be disparity in NIH RO1 grant funding (1-3). To emphasize the magnitude of this problem, currently only 5 investigators at the prestigious, historically black medical school of Howard University have NIH RO1 grants. This lack of NIH RO1 grants to minority investigators is not generally appreciated, since it is concealed by the total NIH support to these schools, derived from NIH programs designed to improve racial diversity in science with large grants targeted to improve the infrastructure of minority institutions, including training grants (4). Accordingly, we compared data from the NIH Reporter on NIH support to 6 minority institutions with that of 6 non-minority institutions with almost identical total NIH support. The non-minority institutions received $92 \pm 5\%$ of their NIH funding from RO1 grants, whereas the minority institutions received only $15 \pm 4\%$ of their NIH support from RO1 grants, despite having similar levels of total NIH support.

The goal of this letter is to stimulate awareness of the deficiency in NIH RO1 grants at minority institutions, by illuminating the magnitude of the problem, which has not been appreciated. Until it is appreciated, it will not be possible to provide a solution. Our concept for potential correction is threefold: 1. Mentoring by a faculty member with a history of NIH RO1 funding is essential; 2. The need and impact of mentoring does not cease after a post-doctoral fellowship; 3. Simply placing minority students at universities with faculty, who are well funded by the NIH, also does not appear to correct the problem, in part, due to absence from their home environment (5). One component of the cause of the problem is that the percentage of faculty at minority institutions that have substantial NIH RO1 support and are members of NIH study sections is low, and accordingly it is difficult to provide needed mentoring in writing and the review of NIH grants to junior minority investigators. Therefore, it is our concept that there should be a novel program devised to address these three points.

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