ASPET Response
Request for Information (RFI) into the Deliberations of the Advisory Committee to the NIH Director Working Group on the Future Biomedical Research Workforce
(Notice Number: NOT-OD-11-106)

October 5, 2011

On behalf of the Council of The American Society for Pharmacology & Experimental Therapeutics (ASPET), I appreciate the opportunity to offer commentary on the “Request for Information (RFI): Input into the Deliberations of the Advisory Committee to the NIH Director Working Group on the Future Biomedical Research Workforce.” ASPET is a 5,000 member scientific society whose members conduct basic and clinical pharmacological research within the academic, industrial and government sectors. Through research endeavors, ASPET members discover and develop new medicines and therapeutic agents that fight existing and emerging diseases, as well as increase our knowledge and understanding of how therapeutic agents affect humans.

In an era of flat or reduced growth for NIH funding, there will be limited professional opportunities and career growth in both academia and industry, necessitating a restructuring of the training of the future biomedical research workforce. ASPET would like to see greater consideration given to preparing young scientists and postdoctoral researchers for careers in non-academic positions. These positions can be outside of the laboratory in fields such as business, law and regulatory affairs, engineering, and teaching positions in high school and 4-year colleges and universities. For those of us with colleagues in such non-traditional science careers, it is clear that the doctoral training these individuals received is being utilized and valued, but that steps could have been taken to optimize their career development to facilitate success in such non-traditional career paths. For example, graduate students and postdoctoral researchers could complete rotations or internships at patent and technology transfer offices or within government sectors involved in regulatory decision making.

To be more competitive in a changing and diminishing employment environment, graduate and postdoctoral students that have a broader and more comprehensive academic background and experience will be more attractive to employers. As it stands, the current training model increasingly fails to meet the needs and interests of our trainees and our Nation, particularly because the number of Ph.D.s that have been awarded far exceeds the number of available jobs in academia and industry. Yet, as our society comes to rely more and more on technology (food, climate, energy, and health), it will be ever more important for businesses, law firms and political entities to have a high representation of people who understand science and how science is conducted and evaluated. Therefore, when we include these non-traditional careers in the demand side of the equation the need for Ph.D. graduates persists. Further, non-traditional careers should be scored as successes when Federally-supported training grants are reviewed.

To help implement this strategic shift in training, NIH could support internship programs that offer a variety of non-academic options. The American public now pays to train scientists preparing for academic faculty positions or for positions in industry; unfortunately, those job prospects are very limited and may not exist in the future. We clearly need educated scientists for positions in many underserved areas that are seldom considered.
Another consideration for NIH is to develop policies that increase collaboration with science agencies and universities in other countries. A foreign graduate student interested in pursuing an M.D./Ph.D. program could be awarded a partial fellowship from their sponsoring country. This arrangement could help reduce the financial obligation inherent in training students.

ASPET also encourages the Working Group on the Future Biomedical Research Workforce to consider the recommendations offered by the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) that would help facilitate training in alternative scientific careers. ASPET concurs with FASEB’s concern that young scientists’ career paths as well as the biomedical research enterprise are compromised by systemic and economic challenges that threaten the ability of the United States to recruit and retain scientific talent.

ASPET appreciates the Working Group’s effort on these critically important matters.

Sincerely,

Lynn Wecker
President