July 16, 2021

The Honorable Diana DeGette  The Honorable Fred Upton
U.S. House of Representatives U.S. House of Representatives
2111 Rayburn House Office Building 2183 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515 Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative DeGette and Representative Upton,

On behalf of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), thank you for the opportunity to comment on the 21st Century Cures Act 2.0 (Cures 2.0) discussion draft and the accompanying Request for Information (RFI) on the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health (ARPA-H) proposal.

As you know, APLU is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities. Annually, APLU’s 201 U.S. member campuses enroll 4.2 million undergraduates and 1.2 million graduate students, award 1.2 million degrees, employ 1.1 million faculty and staff, and conduct $46.8 billion in university-based research.

We thank you both for your ongoing support for the higher education research community during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research community, and especially early career researchers and graduate students, have been greatly impacted by increased costs, halted or delayed research projects, and uncertain career prospects. One study conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago indicated that “on average, 67 percent of STEM research was delayed or discontinued due to COVID-19.” Additionally, in response to a question during a recent Senate Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations Subcommittee hearing, National Institutes of Health (NIH) Director Francis Collins estimated the lingering financial impact from this lost research productivity at $16 billion. Your leadership in introducing the Research Investment to Spark the Economy (RISE) Act, and your continued support by including it in the Cures 2.0 bill, is truly appreciated.

APLU recognizes President Biden’s deep commitment to advancing medical breakthroughs and the creation of cures and treatments for terrible diseases such as cancer and Alzheimer’s that impact too many patients and their families. While the ARPA-H proposal is certainly exciting, its long-term success will depend on continued robust support for fundamental research at the existing divisions within the NIH and across the federal government. The research supported by the National Science Foundation, Department of Energy, and others in areas such as advanced computing and artificial intelligence are vital components to delivering on the potential of precision medicine. As you work to establish ARPA-H, Congress and the Administration should work together to ensure that investments in a new agency are balanced with funding for existing

1 New Survey of Top STEM Graduate Programs Finds Innovations May Be Here to Stay | NORC.org
NIH programs and other agencies. New investments in ARPA-H should not come at the expense of existing programs.

While there are great success stories in the experiences of DARPA and ARPA-E, successful funding applicants currently are more likely to come from a relatively narrow set of institutions due to the nature of program manager/researcher relationships and the mission-oriented nature of funding decisions. In order to sustain biomedical innovation and a robust economy as our national demographics change, I would urge Congress to think about diversity, equity and inclusion issues as ARPA-H is created.

Our nation’s public research universities have a critical role to play in helping create a more just and equitable society through high-quality education and welcoming and inclusive environments for diverse student bodies and researchers. APLU currently co-leads the NSF INCLUDES Aspire Alliance, which is a multi-institutional collaboration. Working at the individual, institutional, regional, and national levels, the project provides the higher education and research community with promising practices to broaden student participation in STEM programs, foster career pathways toward the professoriate, and tools to effectively recruit, hire, and retain STEM faculty from underrepresented groups. NIH Director Collins has made a significant commitment through the NIH UNITE initiative to bolster diversity within the biomedical workforce and racial equity on the NIH campus and within the extramural community.

While some have advocated for a level of independence for the operations of ARPA-H, APLU support its inclusion in the UNITE initiative and other programs to ensure participation by underrepresented groups and diverse institutions. APRA-H should also have a robust young investigator program with intentional goals of reaching a diverse cohort of researchers.

Much of the success of DARPA and ARPA-E is also dependent on a set of well-qualified and creative program managers. NIH should work with these agencies as it establishes its criteria for program managers and also ensure that it recruits diverse program managers across industry and academia.

Thank you again for your long commitment to the higher education research community. We look forward to continuing to work with you as you advance CURES 2.0 through the legislative process.

Sincerely,

Peter McPherson
President
APLU