Editor's LETTER

ACS chemical biology

The Capital To Drive Scientific Research

With the economy in the midst of a recession, funding for scientific research, already stagnant over the past few years, finds itself facing a difficult future. The percentage of federally funded U.S. grant applications has decreased by half over the past decade, and it seems the trend may continue, both in the U.S. and abroad. So, what can be done in order to maintain a culture of innovation in the face of so much economic turmoil?

As scientists, we can certainly advocate for a greater share of the resources that are available; with a $700 billion bailout in the works, the issue is not an absolute lack of funds, but rather where those funds are directed. In calling for increased allocations for scientific research, it should be stressed that Congress would be supporting a growing industry and a source of jobs, while maintaining the country's competitiveness in a global marketplace. And just as public works projects stimulate the economy while providing benefits for all, scientific projects provide far-reaching benefits, including new medical treatments and energy solutions.

Realistically though, even with increased allocations, it is unlikely that there will be a true surge in scientific funding until there is a surge in the overall economy. No one can predict when that will happen, so what tangible things can we do? I would suggest increased dedication to the teaching and training of young scientists. In a difficult job market, many people will look to further their education, meaning we can expect an influx of undergraduate and graduate students arriving on campuses seeking knowledge and mentorship. These young researchers will make up the core of the future scientific leaders in this country, and it will be critical to nurture these students from the outset of their careers.

We can also reach out to students to stoke their interest in science at an even younger age. For instance, the American Chemical Society provides a program called Project SEED, through which economically disadvantaged students can spend a summer working alongside a scientist in an academic, industry, or government research laboratory. The program has been running since 1964 and has helped to launch hundreds of careers.

Each mentor works with only one or two students, ensuring individual attention as the students develop laboratory, written, and oral skills. Mentors can also provide career guidance and recommendations for college, while past participants have additional opportunities to receive scholarships for college. You can learn more about the program, including how to become a mentor, at www.acs.org/projectseed.

The financial pinch may be with us for the time being, but through education and programs like Project SEED, we can all help maintain the human capital that drives scientific research.

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