

Congress of the United States House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

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October 22, 2020

Dr. Victor DiRita
President
American Society for Microbiology
1752 N Street NW
Washington, DC 20036

Dear Dr. DiRita:

I want to thank the American Society for Microbiology for sponsoring the *Strengthening Career Pathways in Science for Underrepresented Groups* congressional briefing. Please allow me to use this letter to address the meeting participants.

I regret that I am unable to join you for this event, but I want to commend you all for helping to advance this difficult, but important discussion. In particular, I want to thank the moderators and speakers. Your voice is critical for raising awareness of the harms caused by systemic racism in the sciences. I know that the burden of speaking out too often falls on leaders like you, and the toll that those efforts takes on you too often goes unacknowledged. Thank you for the work you are doing—it is vitally important work.

Unfortunately, this Administration has taken an ill-informed and aggressive approach to rolling back the modest progress that has been achieved to date in making the sciences more inclusive. Diversity and inclusion training in federal workplaces, at universities, and in all companies that hold Federal contracts is being undermined. Universities that are seeking to have honest conversations about racism on their own campuses are being targeted. I want to assure you that the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology is actively engaging with the science agencies and universities to monitor these concerning situations and is prepared to take more public action as needed. While I am deeply frustrated that rather than focusing on solutions, we are still debating the reality of systemic racism, I remain committed to doing the hard work that must be done to move our country forward.

Developing a diverse and inclusive science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) workforce is a top priority for my Committee. Through hearings, oversight, and legislation, we

have been working to address the inequities we observe across all disciplines and at all levels of STEM studies and careers.

Over the past two years, our Committee has advanced several bills to address the myriad inequities in the STEM workforce. We enacted a bill to bestow Congress's highest civilian honor, the Congressional Gold Medal, on the hundreds of women mathematicians and engineers who withstood the daily indignity of racial segregation and gender discrimination to help us win the space race. We passed a bill to rename the National Science Foundation's flagship telescope, currently under construction, after a pioneer and advocate for women in STEM, Dr. Vera Rubin. This marked the first time a national observatory was named after a woman.

We passed three bills out of the House that are aimed at identifying and lowering barriers, and creating new opportunities for underrepresented groups in STEM studies and careers - H.R. 2528 the *STEM Opportunities Act*, H.R. 36 the *Combating Sexual Harassment in Science Act*, and H.R. 4372 the *MSI STEM Achievement Act*. I have urged the Senate to bring these important bills up for a vote before the end of the year. Increasing the diversity of the STEM workforce is critical to ensuring our research enterprise is tackling the most important set of problems and benefiting all Americans, as well as drawing on all of our brainpower to remain economically competitive.

Equally important to advancing racial justice in the sciences is advancing racial justice through science. In many of the policy debates Congress and other policymakers engage in, the health and wellbeing of communities of color hangs in the balance. I feel strongly that my Committee has an important role to play to ensure those debates are informed by the best available evidence. To that end, we have developed a number of bills to address societal challenges that disproportionately harm racial and ethnic minority Americans, including H.R. 435 the *National Gun Violence Research Act*, H.R. 7252 the *Promoting Fair and Effective Policing Through Research Act*, and H.R. 8239 the *Forensic Science Research and Standards Act*.

However, these challenges cannot be solved from the top down. We must cultivate a sense of responsibility and commitment to change throughout the scientific community if we are to root out the policies and cultural norms that perpetuate inequities and injustice. I am heartened to see the groundswell of support from the research community, including associations like the American Society for Microbiology, for creating real and lasting change. I look forward to continuing to work alongside you to ensure those aspirations are realized.

Sincerely,



Eddie Bernice Johnson
Chairwoman
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology