FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 6, 2004
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White House Lauds American Physiological Society For 40 Years Of Mentoring Underrepresented Minorities In Biomedicine

WASHINGTON (May 6, 2004) -- The White House and the National Science Foundation (NSF) today announced that the American Physiological Society (APS) is being awarded the 2003 Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics, Science and Engineering Mentoring.

The award carries a $10,000 grant, which APS will use to help fund the Porter Physiology Fellowship Program designed to encourage underrepresented minority students in pursuing a doctorate in the physiological sciences. (See www.the-aps.org for more information.) APS was one of eight institutions and nine individuals to receive the Presidential award.

Based on APS’ 40-year efforts, the Presidential Award said: “The American Physiological Society has undertaken initiatives across multiple levels of the education continuum to: develop long-term targeted programs for minority students and teachers; increase diversity among physiologists; and monitor the progress of minorities in the field of physiology.”

APS Executive Director Dr. Martin Frank said: “The Society’s programs to promote physiology among underrepresented minority students from Kindergarten through post-doctoral studies started in 1966 when the Porter Fellowship refocused its efforts to encourage post-doctoral minority students. That was followed in 1987 by the APS Minority Travel Fellowships to our annual meeting and in 1990 when APS instituted its high school programs.”

According to Dr. Marsha Lakes Matyas, APS Educational Director: “What sets the APS diversity efforts apart is that all of our programs – from preschool through graduate education – are carefully designed to encourage active participation by minority participants and are evaluated regularly for their impact and effectiveness,” she said. “As a result, APS efforts form a cohesive and coherent support network promoting both diversity and excellence in science education and biomedical research.”

“Minority participation in science has its roots in the early school years,” Dr. Matyas added. “Encouragement and role models must be teamed with excellence in science teaching in order to open the world of science to underrepresented students. Teachers in APS programs learn to integrate proven methods such as inquiry-based learning with Internet and other technologies to help students develop problem-solving and analytical skills for both science careers and citizenship in a technology-based world.”

In supporting the APS nomination for the award, L. Gabriel Navar, chair of Tulane University School of Medicine’s Department of Physiology, said: “As a member of the APS for over 30 years and a Mexican-American, it has been extremely gratifying to see the development of a diverse collection of programs
designed to enhance the participation of members of underrepresented groups in science in general and the physiological sciences in particular.”

Dr. Pamela H. Gunter-Smith, Porter Professor of Physiology and Associate Provost for Science and Mathematics at Spelman College, noted that “Most, if not all, of the minority physiologists who have successful careers in science can point to the APS as being pivotal in supporting their careers.” A former Porter Predoctoral Fellow herself, Dr. Gunter-Smith said, “One of the achievements of which I am most proud is that of my students who have completed their PhDs, two are physiologists and both are former Porter Fellows.” Dr. Gunter-Smith chairs the APS Porter Fellowship Program.

In a recent study, Drs. Frank and Matyas found that of the 73 Porter Fellowships awarded between 1967 and 2001, 64% were working in professional positions as physiologists, 20% were still completing their doctorate and 14% were in post-doctoral studies. Also, 42% were women, 67% were African-American and 29% were Hispanic. One Native American and two Pacific Islanders also participated.

Other recent examples of diversity mentoring programs come from the APS annual meeting in Washington, D.C. in late April:

Over 30 local high school students and 30 teachers attended an all-day, hands-on and informational program, including a panel about careers in physiology. Eighteen APS mentors were teamed with students for lunch and a tour of the scientific displays.

APS awarded 55 Minority Travel Fellowships which allowed pre- and post-doctoral students from all over the country to attend the 5-day annual meeting. Each student was paired with an APS member-mentor who advised them on professional and networking matters. The Minority Travel Fellowship is underwritten by APS and the National Institute of Diabetes & Digestive & Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) and the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS).

The American Physiological Society (www.the-aps.org) is a professional scientific membership organization devoted to fostering scientific research, education, and the dissemination of scientific information. The APS supports a variety of educational activities including programs and fellowships to encourage the development of young scientists at the undergraduate and graduate levels, with a particular focus on women and underrepresented minorities. Founded in 1887, the Society's membership includes more than 11,000 professionals in science and medicine.

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