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Championing Undergraduate Research in Uncertain Times

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As a nonpartisan organization committed to advancing undergraduate research, the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) believes in the power of collaboration across disciplines, institutions, associations, government, and communities to ensure that research continues to serve the public good. With the start of a new presidential administration on January 20, 2025, the United States entered a executive policies and practices challenging educational, cultural, political, and governmental norms. These actions have destabilized the longstanding role of the federal government as the largest funder of research in the United States. Policies targeting colleges and universities have halted research and placed academic freedom at risk. In responding to these unsettling changes, we have embraced our longstanding advocacy mission with renewed commitment.

Student research is particularly vulnerable. The National Science Foundation (NSF) has been forced to cancel grants that sought to broaden participation across the sciences and to halve the number of Graduate Research Fellowships. Changes in the National Institute of Health, and grant terminations at both the National Endowment for the Humanities and National Endowment for the Arts threaten avenues for student research. Eliminating the Institute of Museum and Library Services reduces student access to relevant resources. Ending programs that support student research have long-term effects on the pipeline of diverse and creative researchers, and reduce our national capacity to produce original scholarship and innovation.

Building upon its origins in advocacy for undergraduate research, and subsequent history of advocacy activism, CUR has responded swiftly and strategically to this unfolding crisis. This response began immediately, and on February 10, 2025, the CUR Executive Committee sent its first appeal to membership asking for help in advocating

for the future of undergraduate research. Since then, we have continuously encouraged members to contact local legislative offices, utilize CUR advocacy resources, and share stories and data with CUR to amplify collective support for undergraduate research. That same week CUR held a special advocacy plenary session at its Grant Dialogues Conference, and joined nearly fifty other disciplinary and higher education associations in signing an American Association for the Advancement of Science coalition letter in support of scientific research. CUR President Maria Iacullo-Bird followed with a letter to the CUR Community in which she acknowledged the extraordinary challenges, and outlined a series of advocacy recommendations.

In the months that followed and continuing to the present, CUR is working closely with its advocacy partner, Bose Public Affairs Group, to track federal developments and assess the impact on research, higher education, and nonprofits to shape a meaningful and nimble advocacy strategy responsive to the rapidly altered and still-evolving landscape. CUR's Executive Officer Lindsay Currie is engaged in daily and weekly communication with association networks and nonprofit and educational leadership to exchange information and strategies, and joining collaborative efforts to share stories illustrating the importance of research and the significance of engaging student researchers. She messages membership about agency and endowment cuts and grant cancellations with links to action alerts to facilitate advocacy communications, and continues to join sign-on letters and coalitions in support of research and student success. Notably, CUR signed the April 22 national coalition letter organized by the Association of American Colleges and Universities titled, "A Call for Constructive Engagement." The statement has garnered more than five hundred signatories from institutions of higher education, disciplinary associations, and educational organizations.

CUR's well-established initiatives have taken on renewed urgency and impact. On March 3, CUR Scholars Transforming through Research Advocacy Day on Capitol Hill brought 65 campus representatives and 146 undergraduate researchers representing 57 institutions and 22 states to meet with Congressional legislators and their staffs. The National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR)

2025, held April 7-9 in Pittsburgh, PA with 4,600 registrants and 3,100 student presenters was a powerful demonstration of undergraduate research's national significance, reinforcing CUR's advocacy goals.

Recent CUR presidential addresses have prioritized advocacy, underscoring the organization's commitment to championing undergraduate research nationally and internationally. Speaking at the British Conference of Undergraduate Research Posters in Parliament held on March 5 in London, Maria Iacullo-Bird delivered a compelling call to action in the context of newly frayed alliances and humanitarian funding losses. She proposed that the growing collaborative connections of the global undergraduate research network develop opportunities for soft diplomacy across nations to do good in the world. At NCUR, Iacullo-Bird urged attendees to actively advocate for the vital importance of all fields of research. She called on student scholars to contribute to CUR's advocacy efforts by sharing both their stories of research achievement, and stalled progress and lost opportunities due to funding disruptions, emphasizing the need for sustained support of undergraduate and graduate research opportunities across disciplines and institutions.

The depth and reach of CUR's advocacy work reflects the gravity of this unprecedented crisis for research and higher education brought on by the current fracturing of the federal government's historic role as the primary patron of research in the United States. Early in the Cold War, President Harry Truman recognized the importance of America's preeminence in research as the leader of the free world, and in 1950 Congress established the NSF. During the last seventy-five years, bipartisan support for NSF and other federal agencies and endowments has been testament to the critical role of federal programs in advancing knowledge and innovation to benefit the American people and all of humanity, and is a significant component of U.S. leadership in the world.

The current situation demands from us steadfast and inclusive advocacy efforts for all research, and unwavering resilience for ourselves, our students, our institutions, and our nation. During this challenging time, CUR remains committed in its mission and values to champion undergraduate research, support our members, and advocate for an inclusive and thriving research enterprise. Together, we will navigate what lies ahead with purpose and unity.