AMERICAN ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

February 17, 2026

Subject: The Importance of NSF Workforce Development Programs to the Astronomical Community

Dear MPS Directorate and MPS-Astro Section leadership,

On behalf of the over 8,500 members of the American Astronomical Society, including its 3,400 student members, I am writing to underscore the critical importance of the National Science Foundation's (NSF's) workforce development programs for the U.S. astronomical community. As we continue into FY2026, I urge the Astronomical Sciences Section and NSF leadership to maintain robust support for grants and programs that support students and early-career researchers in the scientific community.

The impact of NSF's investment on the astronomical community is perhaps most visible in its Foundation-wide pipeline programs, such as the Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REU) program and the Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP). REUs continue to be one of the most effective tools for bringing talented students into the fold of professional astronomy, often serving as catalysts for undergraduates' decisions to pursue STEM as a career. The GRFP then helps to support the most promising students through their graduate studies, ensuring that our field remains competitive and that top talent is not lost due to a lack of predictable support.

In the astronomical sciences specifically, the Astronomy and Astrophysics Fellowship Program (AAPF) — established following the National Academies' 2000 Decadal Survey on Astronomy and Astrophysics — is an exceptional grant for preparing early-career scientists for intensive research and leadership roles. NSF's commitment to student and early-career science, along with support for grants via the Astronomy and Astrophysics Grants (AAG), Launching Early-Career Academic Pathways (LEAPS) in the Mathematical and Physical Sciences, Advanced Technologies and Instrumentation (ATI), Major Research and Instrumentation (MRI), and the Faculty Early Career Development (CAREER) programs, has helped the U.S. preserve its status as one of the most highly trained and technologically advanced nations in physics and astronomy.

While the AAS recognizes the difficult fiscal environment created by the slight funding decrease for NSF in FY2026, we believe that workforce development is an area in which NSF absolutely cannot afford to pull back. These programs are not merely line items; they represent the renewal of the human capital that drives American leadership in science. Maintaining robust support for these grants is a strategic necessity to ensure that the U.S. remains a global leader in innovation within the astronomical and adjacent sciences.

As details arise regarding FY2026 spending plans, I would welcome any insights on how NSF plans to continue its support for the astronomical community. If the AAS can help to provide community-based input on NSF's mission-critical grants and programs, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Thank you for your continued support for the astronomical community.

Sincerely,

Dara Norman, PhD
President, American Astronomical Society