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Dear Colleagues,

I cannot envision a more capable, visionary leader for an ambitious, forward-looking university than Dr. Alexandra Medina-Borja. Through my work with her at the National Science Foundation over the past four years, I know that she has the visionary thinking, tirelessness, collaboration skills, and determination needed to make great strides into the future. She is the kind of leader who will make an institution better by serving its students, staff, and faculty.

My evaluation of Dr. Medina-Borja's capabilities and integrity are based on my personal knowledge of her work, together with my own substantial experience in academic leadership. I worked closely with her over four years (April 2017 – March 2021) during my service as director of the National Science Foundation's Division of Undergraduate Education. Please see the brief description of my career at the end of this letter.

Dr. Medina is a visionary leader who gets things done.

When I arrived at NSF, the Division of Education and Human Resources was encouraging us to engage in visionary thinking about the future. Dr. Medina-Borja met with me within the first few weeks of my arrival to pitch an idea of envisioning how undergraduate STEM education needed to evolve to meet the changing needs of the students, as well as the changing landscape of work, society, and technology. She subsequently led efforts to bring in visionary thinkers and leaders who had already moved forward to develop new student-centered educational programs. These leaders met with NSF staff to explore the landscape of possibilities and necessities for enabling the country to sustain its leadership in STEM innovation and to educate a STEM capable workforce.

This foundational work led to a Directorate-level effort to map the future of STEM education. This approach is a good illustration of Dr. Medina-Borja's leadership style. Based on her selfless drive to improve the world, combined with her experiences, her constant effort to stay on top of current situations, and her professional contacts, she first works to get a small group of people involved and invested. This group defines the scope of the problem and likely solutions. In the effort to envision the future of STEM education, she expanded from that nucleus into more formal efforts that could identify the needed next steps and ultimately move forward to improve STEM education, grant opportunities, and achieve other innovations needed to achieve the goal.

Building from the initial visioning work, Dr. Medina-Borja led the Directorate's effort as Executive Secretary. I was fortunate to serve as a liaison between this effort and the leadership of the directorate. Thus, I was able to experience first-hand how Dr. Medina-Borja leads a high-profile, high-stakes effort that requires leadership prowess. The way these efforts work in the federal government is that the Executive Secretary carries the burden of work for the entire project. Being designated as the Executive Secretary is a high honor and critical responsibility. Whether the project succeeds or fails depends on the Executive Secretary's vision, leadership, and direct effort. Dr. Medina-Borja worked with NSF leadership to identify committee members, determine who the committee should consult, draft the report, coordinate consultation among committee members, and prepare presentation materials for public use. Despite the large amount of sophisticated work required to complete this effort, Dr. Medina-Borja continued all her regular NSF duties as she served this critical leadership role, illustrating her capacity to manage a complex, high profile, very substantial workload.

The effort took more than a year, producing a road map of what the nation needs to do to ensure that everyone has the needed STEM capacity and that anyone who wants to do so can pursue a STEM profession. Dr. Medina-Borja went the next step in this effort, working with the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine to hold national meetings that would explore the steps needed to realize the vision described in the report. The NSF recognized her effort with a Director's award, which is given to only a handful of recipients each year.

Dr. Medina-Borja is a leader with integrity and the highest ethical standards.

I witnessed first-hand Dr. Medina-Borja's professional integrity and her willingness to do the hard work necessary to ameliorate lapses in those standards. In her work as Lead Program Director of the Scholarships in STEM funding program, Dr. Medina-Borja manages hundreds of millions of dollars in NSF awards. Over her tenure, the total is likely to be close to a billion dollars overall. As part of the accountability process, awardees prepare annual reports that are evaluated by program directors. In her portfolio of large awards, she noted practices in one award that were a cause for concern. Based on communications with the University that received the award, she determined that her concerns were justified. She then organized a site visit of NSF staff to visit the institution and explore the issues in detail. Back at NSF, she continued to do the complex, thankless work of recovering funds that were not being used in alignment with the funding program rules.

Her work on this problem greatly enhanced my already high regard for her leadership. Out of the hundreds of millions of dollars, the amount of money recovered is trivial. However, a leader who ensures that lapses in ethical standards are not permitted to persist is the kind of leader who builds coalitions of respect and fairness. She's the kind of leader I want to work for.

Dr. Medina-Borja is a leader with broad skills, including interpersonal, professional, and technical.

Perhaps most importantly for a leader of a large, complex institution, Dr. Medina-Borja has excellent interpersonal skills. She is kind and considerate of others. She is flexible and open to others' ideas, perspectives, and priorities. She works to build consensus, especially when the issues are controversial. She respects the work of others and effectively delegates leadership roles to others, thus simultaneously ensuring that the work gets done, while also supporting the professional growth of others. She is well connected professionally, with a strong network of diverse colleagues who can provide advice and support. She uses her engineering knowledge, including the use of technology tools, to organize project activities, workflow, budgets, and other aspects of getting the job done. Through these strategies, she accomplished more than any other program officer in my division, perhaps in the entire NSF. More importantly, she did not limit her vision to what a program officer usually does. She went above and beyond, making important things happen even when no one else was initially on board.

If you are successful in recruiting Dr. Medina-Borja to the University of Puerto Rico, you will be gaining a visionary, future-focused leader who gets things done. She will be the kind of leader we all want at the helm of our institutions, particularly in challenging times like these.

With best regards,

Robin Wright

Robin Wright, Ph.D.
Professor of Biology Teaching and Learning

Synopsis of Dr. Robin Wright's Curriculum Vitae

Robin Wright earned a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Georgia and a Ph.D. from Carnegie-Mellon University. After postdoctoral training at UC, Berkeley, she was on the faculty of the University of Washington (Zoology Department) for nearly thirteen years. She moved to Minnesota in 2003, joining the leadership team in the College of Biological Sciences as Associate Dean for Faculty and Academic Affairs. She subsequently served as Senior Associate Dean for Undergraduate Initiatives, founding Head of the Department of Biology Teaching and Learning, and professor of Genetics, Cell Biology, and Development. From 2017 to 2021, she served at the National Science Foundation as Director of the Division of Undergraduate Education, then returned in March 2021 to her role as professor in the Department of Biology Teaching and Learning at the University of Minnesota.

Prior to focusing exclusively on undergraduate education research and development, her lab used genetic, cell biological, ecological, and evolutionary approaches to explore cold adaptation. Her laboratory was well known as a great place for undergraduates to pursue research. Over her bench-based research career, she mentored nearly one hundred undergraduate researchers. Prof. Wright has experience teaching both large and small classes, including freshman seminars, large introductory biology courses, and skill-oriented courses for honors students. She helped to develop and co-teaches the Nature of Life program and has been a leader in development of Foundations of Biology, an innovative, team-based introductory biology course for biological sciences majors. She led HHMI- and NSF-supported initiatives to deliver discovery-based research experience for the thousands of majors and non-majors who take biology classes in the College of Biological Sciences. Over her administrative tenure, the four-year graduation rate in the college increased from about 48% to greater than 80%. Prof. Wright has served on the Education Committee of the American Society for Cell Biology and was as chair of the Education Committee for the Genetics Society of America. In addition, she was a senior editor of the Journal, Life Science Education and was the founding Editor-in-Chief of a new biology curriculum journal called *CourseSource*. She served a member of the Executive Committee for the HHMI/National Academies of Science-sponsored Summer Institute on Biology Education. In this capacity, she was named as a National Academies Biology Education Mentor for twelve years. She was elected as a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2012 and was recognized by the Genetics Society of America with the Elizabeth Jones Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Education.