

9 August 2024

Membership Committee
Association of American Universities
1200 New York Ave., N.W.
Washington, DC 20005

To whom it may concern:

We, the undersigned, write to express concern regarding the National Research Council's Highly Prestigious Awards List, which is published on the [AAU website](#). Most notably, we are asking for clarification and transparency as to how the list is created and updated. As a result of AAU's endorsement, this list has become widely used by universities, scientific institutions, and other organizations beyond its original intent.

The specific awards on this list are increasingly being used to make key personnel decisions that are impacting individual faculty and scientific-discipline investments. Though we understand AAU discourages the use of the list for that purpose, that use nonetheless prevails. Information about the criteria used to develop the list, now more than a decade old, and how and when it will be updated is unfortunately thin. As the AAU membership committee has oversight of the awards on this list, we seek to bring these unintentional emerging issues to your attention and provide some potential remedies for a path forward.

External awards to faculty are an increasingly critical component of faculty advancement. Such awards likewise are used for benchmarking evaluation of elite academic institutions as a whole. Such awards may come from scientific societies, governments, and other institutions and are used to reflect individual faculty members' excellence within their disciplines and beyond. Especially important are awards that acknowledge a trajectory for potential future contributions of faculty receiving them and their home institutions rather than only those that purely acknowledge past contributions.

Major and highly prestigious awards (e.g. National Academy Membership, Nobel Prizes) are universally recognized, but generally are bestowed near the end of careers and are predicated by discipline-specific, prestigious awards to the same faculty (some of these awards being on the AAU list). However, not all disciplines are represented in the list used by AAU, and disciplines are certainly not equally represented by faculty membership or innovation potential. Given the age of the list, awards in new disciplines emerging over the last 13-19 years are absent, awards in legacy disciplines developed in the last 13-19 years are absent (e.g. including some NAS awards), and early-career awards are almost

completely absent despite their *prestige* (only **one** early-career award is clearly identified as such and from a singular discipline).

Numerous academic institutions seeking to maintain or gain AAU membership have publicly incorporated the current award list into their strategic plans and institutional goals and, then, downstream into their decision-making on the direction of the institutions. This can include innocuous incentives for faculty to focus their attention on these awards, as well as more problematic redirection of institutional investments into disciplines that are more likely to receive these awards. It also can impact targeted faculty hiring aimed at those who have already achieved these awards (despite being near or beyond their most productive periods) at the expense of emerging researchers. Again, our understanding is that AAU discourages these practices. However, as Goodhart's law states, "When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure."

The single paragraph on the AAU website from which the Highly Prestigious Awards list is accessed offers scant information, only – in very general terms – what types of awards are contained within the list. Completely absent is when and why the list was created, how and when the list is updated, and who was/is involved in the selection process.

Based on conversations we have had with individuals with some degree of familiarity with the list's development, we are of the understanding that the list was developed in 2005 and, perhaps, last updated in 2011. This is despite the fact that some AAU member institutions' public-facing websites suggest that the AAU award list is current. We likewise understand – and accept in good faith – that the list's development included an extensive, inclusive review and selection process. Indeed, it is likely the cost and effort of repeating such an extensive process that prevents it from being updated more regularly.

A list that is relied upon extensively for discipline investment and key personnel decisions across scores of academic, scientific, and cultural organizations should answer to the highest standards of disclosure and transparency. At a minimum, that disclosure and transparency should include:

- Information on the systems and processes used to develop the list, including what qualitative and/or quantitative metrics are used to make selections;
- Disclosure of when the list was developed and last updated;
- What, if any, plans exist to update the list and when, even in general terms, that will take place;
- Description of why the list exists and how it is intended to be utilized, and
- Guidance to organizations and institutions that bestow awards as to what would make their awards eligible for consideration on future lists.

We recognize that no award list will ever be perfect. Yet ultimately, we believe this list, in particular, can serve as an example and should be updated using documented, formal, and transparent procedures. We recognize that there would be substantial investment of time and money to update the list in a manner that would be meaningful and adherent to sound process. We feel certain that you will agree that perpetuating a prestigious awards list that is missing numerous awards that have reached the threshold of “prestigious” and/or removing awards from the list that, for one reason or another, no longer meet that threshold is antithetical to the original purpose of the list.

Given the limited resources of AAU and the National Academies to update this list, we believe non-profit societies (scientific, arts, cultural) can be important collaborators in such a process. Such participation can and must preclude the self-interests of the corresponding organizations and their members. We believe that our organizations and our members not only can exercise such objectivity, but that they are uniquely qualified to identify awards that are prestigious within their corresponding disciplines. There are scores of ways that such perspectives can be gathered. We are ready and willing to discuss with AAU and others how such perspectives can be incorporated into the process.

Finally, there has never have been a time in human history when the importance of research and the pursuit of solutions to humanity’s and the world’s largest challenges has been more important. It is vital, therefore, that the highest achievements within the corresponding professions and disciplines that are seeking such solutions should be reflective of the changing dynamics around us. That should be the case for the Prestigious and Highly Prestigious Awards List as well.

We would be eager to participate in a conversation on this important issue. In the meantime, we thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully Submitted,



Elizabeth Biggs, Interim Executive
Director
Ecological Society of America



LaTrease E. Garrison, Chief Operating
Officer
American Chemical Society



Kristin H. Stevens, Executive Director
ACA: The Structural Science Society



Beth A. Cunningham, CEO
American Association of Physics Teachers



Juliane Baron, Executive Director
Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences (FABBS)



Dave Jackson, Executive Officer
American Society for Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics




Clare Lindahl, CEO
Soil and Water Conservation Society



Jamie L. Vernon, Ph.D., Executive Director and CEO
Sigma Xi, The Scientific Research Honor Society



Sven Leyffer, PhD, President
Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics (SIAM)



Jeffrey J. Volenec, Interim Head and Professor
Department of Agronomy, Purdue University



Gabriela Popescu, President
Biophysical Society



Joseph A. Loo, President
American Society for Mass Spectrometry



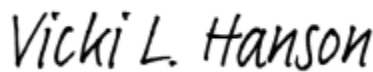
JD Rossouw, President
National Association of Plant Breeding



Tracy Camp, Executive Director and CEO
Computing Research Association



Dr. D. Kashian, President
International Association for Great Lakes Research (IAGLR)



Vicki L. Hanson, Chief Executive Officer
Association for Computing Machinery



James M. Cudahy, Chief Executive Officer
American Society of Agronomy
Crop Science Society of America
Soil Science Society of America



Dr. Kent Rochford, Chief Executive Officer
SPIE - the International Society for Optics and Photonics



Dr. Laura L. McConnell, Senior University and Scientific Society Engagement Lead
Bayer Crop Science