January 16, 2014

Dean’s Letter: Renewed Commitment to Excellence

This is the time of year when many of us take a quiet moment to reflect on what transpired during 2013, while looking to the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

As I reflect on the past year, I first want to express my appreciation to the Faculty Senate for its vote of confidence in recommending my reappointment as dean of Einstein for a third term. I also want to thank the Faculty Senate advisory committee on my reappointment for its diligent efforts in meeting with the many stakeholders who comprise the Einstein community. During and after the formal process, I met with the committee as a whole and with many of its members individually. All provided critical feedback and honest appraisals that were most helpful to me. In line with the Senate recommendation, I agreed to a new four-year term.

Notwithstanding the many difficulties we faced during my prior two terms—the “Great Recession” and the effect of sequestration on the NIH budget to name just two—having served as Einstein’s dean for the past eight years has been one of the most rewarding periods of my life. We can all be proud of what we have accomplished, “against the odds,” in advancing Einstein’s position in biomedical research and education. In fact, for federal fiscal year 2013 NIH funding, we ranked 25th of the 139 medical schools in the U.S., ahead of many major, research-intensive state and private university med schools. Notably, Harvard Medical School at #23 and Einstein were the only top-40-ranked med schools lacking clinical revenue to subsidize the research mission. This accomplishment is a reflection of our outstanding research faculty, who succeeded in making major scientific advances, despite a funding environment with the lowest “paylines” and “success rates” in NIH history.

From an educational standpoint, I am grateful to our faculty, who help produce outstanding, compassionate physicians and scientists. While their training starts in the Bronx, they have taken Einstein’s clinical and research mission to virtually every corner of the world, where they confront an array of devastating diseases. I also value the important bonds that we have forged with our affiliates—from our longstanding relationships with Montefiore Medical Center, Jacobi Medical Center, Bronx Lebanon and North Shore/Long Island Jewish Health System to the newest opportunities established for our students at Maimonides Medical Center. These clinical partnerships offer our medical students a broad range of experiences working with patients from all backgrounds, and whose access to healthcare spans the entire socioeconomic spectrum.

I am especially heartened by the strong partnership that we’ve established with Montefiore, our University Hospital and academic medical center. Our new affiliation agreement is now entering its fifth year—although our longstanding clinical partnership actually spans five decades. This partnership allows us to streamline collaborations in clinical, research and teaching programs that benefit patients, researchers and students. It also has allowed us to spearhead new clinical trials and expand on
translational programs that we have developed through the years. Overall, the partnership translates to improved patient care and outcomes for the diverse communities—in the Bronx and elsewhere—that our institutions serve on a daily basis.

Looking to the future, we continue to face some serious challenges, particularly in relation to the NIH cutbacks resulting from the federal budget sequester. Last year, when the sequester was first enacted—severely reducing funding for research, and hamstringing laboratories across the country—I sent a memo to faculty, noting how anxiety about grant funding was at an all-time high at Einstein, as well as at other leading research institutions. Such anxiety remains of paramount concern; however, earlier this week came news of at least partial relief. House and Senate appropriators appear poised to pass a budget that would restore nearly $1 billion to the NIH budget. If this budget is finally passed, we will at least avoid the government shutdowns that delayed grant reviews and funding decisions. While competition for grant funding will still be fierce, increased NIH funding should translate to increased success rates and fuller funding of grant levels. I want Einstein’s research faculty to know that, working closely with our department chairs, I will dedicate myself to supporting Einstein research to the greatest extent possible.

While research funding is one element critical to our success, so too is our accreditation as an educational institution. A major institutional focus for the coming year is preparation for our Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME) Accreditation Review, scheduled for December 2014. Every eight years, the LCME reviews an institution’s educational program to ensure that it meets established standards for function, structure and performance. Late last year, we held the kickoff event for our 2014 self-study. This process is intended to foster institutional and program improvement. Program accreditation by the LCME confers eligibility on U.S. medical school graduates for medical licensure in most states. It also allows medical students to take the USMLE, participate in the residency match and matriculate into residency programs accredited by the ACGME. It is required for participants in federal grants and programs, including health-professional loans. Therefore, successful completion of the accreditation process is an important goal for our entire Einstein community, and we encourage the participation of as many of you as possible. By contributing to our self-study, you can help shape the report that we will submit to the LCME as part of its accreditation review.

I have no doubt that Einstein will continue to be one of the best, most vibrant research-intensive medical schools in the country. We have great faculty. We have wonderful students. And we have generous donors who support them both. We also have dedicated employees at every level, who work hard to make Einstein a top medical school. I am extremely proud of all that we have accomplished together. While major challenges remain, together we can make 2014 one of the best, most productive years in our long and distinguished history.

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