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Testimony of Lynn Hernandez, Ph. D.
Title: Postdoctoral Research Fellow

My name is Lynn Hernandez and I am a postdoctoral research fellow at Brown University's Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies. I would like to thank the members of the Scientific Resource Management Board for giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts and feelings regarding the possible merger of NIAAA and NIDA. I am here today to not only deliver my testimony but to also speak on behalf of the current class of both NIAAA and NIDA funded postdoctoral fellows who strongly believe that NIAAA should remain a distinct Institute focused on the scientific inquiry of the etiology, treatment, and public health consequences of alcohol use.

I will begin by telling you a little bit about my own personal journey through the educational pipeline, one that ended with me actively and passionately pursuing a career in alcohol research. At the start of my graduate school experience, I had a vague idea of the type of research I wanted to pursue and therefore entered a state of research identity moratorium. In search of a research niche, I engaged in a diverse set of training experiences. These experiences included research with sexually abused children, research with parents of conduct disordered children, and development of couples relationship enhancement programs. Not being fully satisfied or feeling the passion to actively continue pursuing any of these areas of research, I sought advice from a mentor who told me "search for and do whatever keeps that fire in your belly burning." I decided to continue exploring different research options and became involved with a research group that developed and examined the efficacy of community-based interventions for adolescents exhibiting problem behaviors, behaviors which included alcohol abuse. I began my training with them by conducting comprehensive assessments with adolescents engaging in problematic drinking. To my surprise, the challenges that this new population presented sparked and kept the fire burning. This newly discovered interest in alcohol research got me excited to pursue other research activities and experiences related to alcohol abuse. Training as a developmental psychologist, I began to learn about the distinct complexities that existed in examining alcohol use and drug use trajectories among adolescent populations, and also became aware of the distinct challenges in addressing these two behaviors. For instance, alcohol use during adolescence is a developmentally normative behavior, and adolescents drink within the context of a society where alcohol is widely available, aggressively promoted, and where alcohol use among adults is normative. Therefore, addressing alcohol use in adolescents from a "responsible drinking" and harm reduction approach seems appropriate. Yet, drug use during adolescence occurs in the context of other problems in the life course and requires an approach that promotes abstinence. This new understanding led to my pursuit of knowledge on the developmental mechanisms underlying alcohol use among adolescents, an endeavor which was supported by NIAAA. It was through this support received from NIAAA that I was allowed to explore and passionately commit to an alcohol research career.

After graduating with a doctoral degree in tow, I was fortunate to receive further training in alcohol etiology and treatment development by obtaining a postdoctoral fellowship at the Center for Alcohol and Addictions Studies. My research at Brown has focused on the development of culturally appropriate alcohol interventions for Hispanic/Latino adolescents. Once again, this research has been

supported by NIAAA, and most recently by an NIAAA-funded diversity supplement to further my training and expert knowledge development in this area of alcohol research.

The point of describing my educational trajectory is not to stress the distinct mechanisms underlying alcohol use and drug use among adolescents and Hispanic/Latinos, but to emphasize the importance of having two distinct institutes for the current and future training of young investigators. As I myself experienced, young investigators go through a phase of research identity exploration. We experiment with different research options before arriving at the one we would like to dedicate our research careers to. These choices are influenced and shaped by the support available to us and by our beliefs in our capacity to negotiate what can be complex and daunting funding systems. For those of us who chose to become alcohol researchers, having a distinct institute to house our research ideas and interests encourages us to continue pursuing knowledge in alcohol research and allows us to disseminate this knowledge to further the advancement of alcohol research. Losing an independent institute devoted to research on alcohol abuse and alcoholism would not only deter the recruitment of new researchers to the field but also discourage those in the process of developing expert knowledge, thus disrupting the educational pipeline. As young investigators, we represent the new generation of researchers; therefore, without a distinct institute to support our alcohol specific ideas, the alcohol research field would suffer from a lack of diverse and innovative approaches to the scientific inquiry of alcohol.

Therefore, speaking for myself and on behalf of my colleagues, we believe that a merger of NIAAA with NIDA would harm alcohol research efforts rather than advance the field. It would do so by hindering the recruitment and retention of promising new alcohol investigators, thus doing a disservice to the future of alcohol research.

Thank you for allowing me to testify before your committee.