Ref: Dr. T. C. Nelson
Fellowship 3424

November 22, 1954

Dr. Ronald E. Scantlebury
Chief, Research Fellowships Branch
National Institutes of Health
Bethedda 14, Maryland

Dear Dr. Sacntlebury:

I am sorry to have delayed so long in submitting a formal evaluation of Dr. Nelson's progress as a research fellow in my laboratory from September 1953 through October 1954. As he was leaving not long after the termination of his first fellowship year, to complete his postdoctoral studies with Dr. W. Szybalski at Rutgers University, I thought I could conveniently defer my report until the completion of his whole period here. I believe also that Dr. Nelson himself has sent you reprints of our paper in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences which embodies our work, as well as a brief progress report, of which I am forwarding another copy at the present time.

Dr. Nelson has been an industrious worker and has all the intellectual faculties that should make for a first class research worker. Unfortunately, something within him, I suppose some emotional difficulties, keeps him back. I had been optimistic that he would grow out of them, but it now seems that normal immaturity is not the whole story. These difficulties are overtly reflected in his scientific performance in several ways: a studied lack of neatness in his lab. habits (though I must admit we were crowded then and could not offer as spacious and private facilities as we would like); an equally studious evasion of any opportunity to accept responsibilities in the good order of the lab. routine (again a rebuttal, he would not evade direct instructions); and a pretended indifference, cynicism and pessimism of the success of any proposal he or anyone else might make for experimental attack (nevertheless he would still eventually go at it with vigor in fact if not in appearance). In his personal habits, there was an obvious masochistic bent. These traits were hardly manifested to such a degree as to suggest psychopathy, and his personal relationships, except insofar as they impinged on these affected attitudes towards science, were wholesome and friendly. But on the whole, unless they can be healed, they will continue to operate to the continued detriment of his scientific career. Which is a pity, as I've already stated, he has the other qualifications, and is a likable enough personaility. It was on these accounts primarily that we both agreed

that a change of scene might be beneficial. Frankly, I believe that Dr. Nelson will bring to his new sponsor, Dr. Szybalski, as much by way of scientific insight and stimulation as he will receive. However, I hope that the new situation will help stimulate Nelson's sense of responsibility and independence, and that their congenial personal relationship will also help bring out his best talents. I also hope that his fellowship will, as it may, mature into a more secure position for Dr. Nelson at his new station.

May I make one suggestion concerning the administration of extended fellowships; that is that the moral commitments be made to fellows without requiring endorsement, in advance, by the research sponsor for more than one year at a time. Most fellows need more than a year to complete their postdoctoral training, but it would facilitate a careful, sober review by both sponsor and fellow at each yearly interval if the sponsor were expected to extend his endorsement at that occasion. To implement his renewal, the fellow should, of course, renew or submit satisfactory alternative planesof study. As I understand it, however, the fellowship is awarded to and for the fellow, not the sponsor. The present arrangement may tend to automatically, bind both to plans that had been made long before, and especially before they had had an opportunity to understand one another. I realize that the program is quite flexible enough, as in the present instance, to accomodate such changes, but unless there are administrative difficulties, I would recommend that the primacy of the fellow's interests be ~~recognized~~ reemphasized in this way.

Dr. Nelson is far from being the first young scientist whose chief limitations in creative productivity seem to bed istinct from their innate abilities. Probably most researchers in other fields, like myself, do not have the psychiatric training to be able to predict whether personal idiosyncrasies will be passing phases or serious obstacles. In recent articles, in the American Scientist, Dr. Kubie dwelt on the negative aspects of these problems. I am sure the Fellowships Program is deeply concerned over the needless frustration of scientific talent, beyond merely taking cognizance of these factors in its preliminary evaluations. I would be at a loss myself to suggest what constructive action should be taken, aside from discouraging (by failing to support) otherwise unexceptionable candidates for fellowships.

May I add a final word? I know several candidates for fellowships who I thought to be worthy, but were unsuccessful, but I have yet to meet a Fellow whom I thought should not have been appointed. The only thing I know of wrong with the Fellowships is that there are not more of them.

Yours sincerely,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics