



February 21, 2024

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Dear Drs. Price, Gallimore, Bennett, Alberts, Benneer, Jones, and Bernhardt,

The American Institute of Biological Sciences (AIBS) strongly encourages Duke University to reconsider the decision to close its herbarium. AIBS is a non-profit scientific society dedicated to increasing our understanding of all life. We work with our members and other partners to promote informed decision-making that advances the biological sciences for the benefit of science and society. Our more than 100 organizational member societies and institutions collectively represent more than 100,000 scientists, science educators, and students and include scholarly societies, professional associations, academic institutions and departments, as well as museums, botanic gardens, and other science collections. Well-curated natural history collections are a critical foundation for our member societies and for scientific research and education. They also represent decades to centuries of specimens and data for effective monitoring of biodiversity change over time and will only become more valuable for future monitoring.

AIBS is deeply concerned over recent reports regarding the closure of the Duke University herbarium due to a change in university funding priorities. Duke's proposed divestment of its herbarium is unprecedented. At 825,000+ specimens, the Duke Herbarium will be the largest herbarium in the history of the U.S. to be abandoned by its host institution. The decision to shut down the herbarium is at odds with the national momentum behind biological collections. At a time when collections are increasingly being recognized as critical resources for scientific research, including in the 2022 CHIPS and Science Act ([Public Law No: 117-167](#)), the [March 2023](#) and [December 2023](#) White House reports on the U.S. Bioeconomy, and the landmark community reports published by the [Biodiversity Collections Network](#) and the [National Academies](#), Duke's decision to forgo responsibility of their herbarium specimens - and the important biodiversity research they support - sets a terrible precedent.

Duke Herbarium's curation and digitization activities have been directly funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF), as late as in [2020](#) and [2022](#), demonstrating not only the significance of the collection but also the understanding of reviewers and panelists that Duke was committed to sustaining it. It has also been the foundation for NSF-funded basic research in fields such as the evolution of economically important plants ([NSF Award No. 2038213](#)) and the biology of Arctic ecosystems ([NSF Award No. 2031927](#)), a focus one of the ten "Big ideas" in recent NSF priority setting.

The Duke Herbarium is also a resource for the global botanical community, not just for personnel based at the university. Closing the herbarium will hinder the work of the entire, global community of plant and fungal biodiversity collections and researchers. It is highly unlikely that any one herbarium could absorb this number of specimens. Thus, the likely outcome is that the collection will be split and sent to multiple locations. This will not only disrupt the storied historical context of the collection, it undoubtedly will lead to confusion about where particular Duke Herbarium specimens have gone. Access to specimens by researchers is imperative to realize the scientific potential a collection holds. Without sufficient resources to incorporate transferred specimens and data into their destination collections, the negative impact on the usability of specimens and enhancement of existing collections will be even greater.

The decision to divest the herbarium at Duke University would dramatically inhibit future Duke students and faculty from participating in the critical work of documenting the diversity of life, monitoring its change over time, and developing innovative solutions to global challenges. It also diminishes Duke University's status as an academic institution at a time when biodiversity research and collections are being studied in increasingly novel and technologically advanced ways. Duke students will lose access to a world-class archive of plant biodiversity that has supported student research and training for over a century.

The world's community of scientists must work together to preserve the healthy ecosystems we need to survive in this time of environmental challenges. It is disheartening to see a prestigious institution like Duke University, which has [dedicated](#) itself to climate research and sustainability, withdrawing support for a crucial resource essential to this research. Such a decision casts a somber shadow over the centennial celebration of an academic institution with a rich history of significant scientific contributions. We strongly urge you to reconsider your decision, as it would lead to serious negative ramifications not only for researchers and students at Duke, but also for a wide range of local (e.g. natural resource agencies in North Carolina, researchers in the Research Triangle, etc.) and global stakeholders that rely on the herbarium.

Sincerely,



Scott Glisson  
Chief Executive Officer