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Is the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Turning Away From DEI for Good?

Laurie Udesky | September 4, 2025



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The Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI), based in Chevy Chase, Maryland, isn't just one of the world's largest private funders of biomedical research and science education. With assets in excess of \$25 billion, it's also one of the wealthiest philanthropic organizations out there, period. For many years, it also made diversity, equity and inclusivity a centerpiece of its giving.

Its Hanna Gray fellowship program, for example, supported postdoctoral scholars with up to \$1.5 million, eight-year stipends to carry them through their postdoc research to their first faculty research positions. A [press release](#) about the fellowship program's launch in 2016 noted that the Hanna Gray Fellowship program would recruit early career scientists "from gender, racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and other groups underrepresented in the field."

To achieve the program's goals, HHMI's former Vice President and Chief Scientific Officer David Clapham promised at the time to "catalyze change by supporting a diverse cadre of promising scientists."

But in this year's political climate, the institute appears to be backing away from the program and from other DEI-oriented commitments.

This May, HHMI paused the program, unmooring applicants for its 2026 fellowships who had submitted their applications in late February. Earlier, in February, HHMI also canceled its \$60 million Inclusive Excellence 3 (IE3) program, which was set to continue providing funding to 104 universities and colleges for another three years. That

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program currently does not appear on HHMI’s website.

The Inclusive Excellence 3 program was the third iteration of the program, which awarded its first round of grants in 2017 to support STEM students from underrepresented backgrounds in their first year of college to continue in the sciences and to change campus culture.

A 2022 [study](#) of records of more than 109,000 students from six universities in the United States referenced HHMI alongside major public funding agencies like the NIH and the NSF that aimed, at the time, to change the institutional systems that push underrepresented students out of STEM. Researchers concluded that white males who start college with the intention of graduating with a STEM degree have the highest likelihood of achieving that goal (48%) compared to women from underrepresented minorities (35.3%).

“Sustaining advances in diversity and inclusion requires a scientific culture that is centered on equity,” said HHMI’s then-Vice President of Leadership and Culture Blanton Tolbert in a 2022 [press release](#) about the Inclusive Excellence program.

Given its sheer size and the often highly specialized nature of its funding, HHMI stands somewhat apart from its philanthropic peers. At the same time, its retreat from some equity-focused work this year mirrors the moves other major funders have been making (a notable example [being the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative](#), a fellow science funder). Whether this pullback will continue over the long term is uncertain, but it’s having an immediate impact on grantees

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What one HHMI grantee had to say about a cancelled program

Creating an institutional environment that strengthens equity in the classroom and beyond was exactly what Seth Bush and his colleagues at California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) have been trying to do. “I feel angry as a scientist, because we spent a lot of time helping people get ready to launch,” said Bush, the department chair of liberal studies. Cal Poly was a recipient of the Inclusion Excellence 3 grants.

When he first heard that HHMI was canceling the IE3 program, Bush said, “I was pretty surprised how an organization that I held in pretty high esteem, that I felt was above that sort of pettiness, how quickly they sort of bent the knee to the new administration.” Bush said that the team will likely have enough of the current funding to continue the IE3 program, but for how long is unclear.

Members of Cal Poly’s IE3 team participated in learning communities, Bush said, taking a course known as the [Inclusive STEM Teaching Project](#), a curriculum that teaches inclusive teaching methods to “reduce gender and traditionally underrepresented minority disparities in performance and improve students’ sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and STEM identity.” The learning communities met with a cluster of other higher ed institutions around the country, which were also recipients of the IE3 grant.

The work of the learning communities served as a

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springboard for the Cal Poly IE3 team to develop several research projects that include feedback from students. Those projects involve investigating programs that provide learning support to students to see if they provide a sense of belonging, Bush said. Other research projects will work on developing practices in STEM classrooms that promote diversity, equity and inclusion, and look at the issue of whether a grade point average requirement is a barrier for STEM students seeking admission to Cal Poly's Master's program in polymers and coatings science.

Part of the mindset, according to Jane Lehr, Cal Poly's director of research engagement, is redefining what the institution identifies as a "normal student." As one example, she explained, what was "normal" were nonparents with no dependents whose first year in college was at Cal Poly.

Cal Poly's work on DEI through the IE3 initiative is aligned with [a number of apparent works in progress](#) at the university, including a commitment to building up a degree-seeking undergraduate population that includes half from low-income backgrounds and at least 25% from Hispanic backgrounds.

"And so a lot of the challenges that exist, I think, are because we're designing our classes, we're designing our assignments for a particular type of student, and not all of our students have that capacity," said Lehr, who is also a professor in ethnic studies and women's, gender and queer studies. Students from underrepresented backgrounds, who may be parents or caregivers and live off campus, likely have different needs.

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HHMI reluctant to get specific about its program changes

Diversity, equity and inclusion have become all but taboo terms in some parts of the nonprofit sector and corporate world since President Donald Trump [issued an executive order](#) terminating all federal government efforts that sought to promote diversity, equity and inclusion, calling them “illegal, immoral discrimination programs.”

Anti-DEI sentiment has also been part and parcel of the Trump administration’s elimination of scientific research funding. All in all, the administration has terminated grants totaling over \$3.81 billion from the NIH and the National Science Foundation, the federal agencies that fund the bulk of scientific research and education, according to a data site known as [Grant Witness](#), which uses federal and crowd-sourced data to track terminated federal science grants in 2025.

These cuts have been challenged in the courts and by the federal watchdog Government Accountability Office, which called the cuts [illegal](#). In late June, U.S. District Court Judge

William Young ordered a reinstatement of NIH grants that were cut because they covered diversity-related topics, such as health disparities among LGBTQ and Black communities, and said that he'd "never seen racial discrimination like this," according to an [article](#) in the *New York Times*.

However, on August 21, the Supreme Court paved the way for the Trump administration to cut nearly \$800 million in NIH grants designed to study diseases in minority, gay and transgender communities, even though legal battles about the funding are still ongoing in lower courts, according to an [article](#) in the *Washington Post*.

While these battles are being fought, it's not entirely clear where HHMI stands. A representative from HHMI was reluctant to comment specifically on whether the institute felt pressured by the federal government's stance on DEI. Instead, they said that HHMI was canceling the IE3 program and pausing the Hanna Gray fellowships "amidst ongoing uncertainties in the scientific funding environment."

Now over 70 years old, and with net assets at the end of fiscal year 2024 standing at [\\$25.6 billion](#), HHMI is a juggernaut in the science funding space. HHMI has spent \$4.6 billion on science education and research in the last five years. To put that in perspective, philanthropy's total contribution toward basic and applied research at universities and nonprofit research organizations was about \$24.2 billion in 2023, according to a recently released [Science Philanthropy Indicators](#) report.

HHMI communicated that it will be increasing its support for current scientists who are part of its hallmark Investigators program, which seeks to “empower scientists to make groundbreaking discoveries,” for current Hanna Gray Fellows, and for current [Freeman Hrabowski Scholars](#), a program named after a doctor and researcher credited with “increasing the number of scientists, engineers, and physicians from backgrounds underrepresented in science in the United States.

Lehr, meanwhile, said that HHMI’s cancellation of the IE3 program was heartbreaking and she worries about the impact nationally among all of the IE3 recipients. She told Inside Philanthropy that she was particularly concerned about some of the other recipients who are working to create equity in STEM programs in states that are aggressively policing universities for DEI. As she put it, “That this support is gone, at a time in which I think it is maybe the most it has ever been needed, is horrific.”

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