

Summer's Rhythm

THE ARIA THAT OPENS *PORGY AND BESS* EVOKES THE SLOW, heat-induced tempo of August like nothing else: "Summertime and the living is easy/Fish are jumping and the cotton is high." Indeed, for anyone whose life and work follow the rhythm of an academic calendar, this can be a still, quiet time of year. Classrooms are empty of students, colleagues have fled to idyllic maritime laboratories to teach and think, and more leisurely pursuits beckon. Under normal circumstances, that might have been the case at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, but this has been a summer unlike any other. Fish—of the metaphorical variety, that is—are jumping everywhere.

We are in the throes of two competitions for new investigators. For starters, we are preparing to select a group of physician-scientists from among more than 240 researchers who applied during our patient-oriented research competition—the first time faculty could apply directly, without institutional nominations, in HHMI's history. Our scientific officers and advisors are also hard at work reviewing the 1,072 applications we received in the general competition for new investigators, again based on applications rather than nominations. Final decisions about this group of candidates will not be made until 2008, yet we can already see the value of the open competition model. The field is strong and diverse: it reflects a wide array of disciplines and institutions and establishes a high bar for future competitions.

Despite all this activity, summer still offers an opportunity for reflection. My colleagues and I have thought a lot about the attributes of HHMI's investigator program that optimize its impact on biomedical science. Many of the core principles established in the 1980s remain intact, even as HHMI has evolved to encompass new areas of research, more open selection of investigators, and development of the Janelia Farm Research Campus. Future initiatives—and we're hoping to have news on that front over the next year—will be judged on the basis of their fidelity to those principles.

So what are our core values? Some readers of the *HHMI Bulletin* are probably familiar with the most basic principle: people, not projects. That's a shorthand way of saying that HHMI seeks highly creative and energetic scientists, trusting them to overcome the challenges that arise in their research and giving them the freedom to switch into new areas of opportunity. As a corollary principle, we respect diversity in research styles. We believe that smaller research groups generally provide the best mentoring and encourage collaboration; thus, HHMI supports between five and eight research staff in each of our laboratories. But we recognize that a robust science program must encompass a variety of approaches, so our investigators may seek funds from other agencies to support a larger laboratory.

Gaining expertise in a field takes time and onerous reporting requirements can sap valuable energy, so HHMI believes it is imperative to provide stable, flexible funding. The Institute intervenes only at critical points—for example, to review agreements for consulting or other industry interactions. With freedom and flexibility come high expectations for intellectual output. HHMI



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demands creativity and innovation. We expect our investigators to work at the frontiers of their chosen field, to ask fundamental questions, and to take risks. HHMI prizes impact over publication volume in its merit-based renewal of investigator appointments and recognizes that some areas of research will proceed more slowly than others.

The core principles that guide HHMI's research program extend beyond the individual investigator and laboratory. As an organization, HHMI maintains a diversified research portfolio by taking a broad view of the fields that contribute to progress in the biomedical sciences. We are pleased that so many chemists, engineers, computer scientists, and physicists applied for the general competition. We strive to avoid incremental additions to research areas already well funded by the federal government—the opposite of "living easy." HHMI seeks a healthy dynamic equilibrium by supporting excellent scientists independent of their location while maintaining a presence at numerous geographically dispersed, outstanding research institutions. We hope to create a diverse community of research scientists who are fully engaged at their home institutions and with their HHMI colleagues as collaborators, teachers, and leaders.

With all the care and thought that goes into identifying 65 new HHMI investigators, my colleagues and I won't be slowing down any time soon. Yet these competitions—and the opportunity to reflect on how core beliefs about research might guide our future plans—make it possible for the Institute to "spread [its] wings and take to the sky."