

A Season of Change

EVEN THE DAMP, GRAY DAYS SO PERVASIVE THIS SPRING CAN'T diminish the extraordinary magic with which the season unfurls outside my office here at HHMI's headquarters in Maryland. Arrayed to the right, in all their diaphanous glory, the pale pink blossoms of cherry trees rim the oval pond. Out another window, I glimpse the spreading forms of flowering crab apples with blooms of deep rose. It's a season of change here at HHMI, and that change is not restricted to the surrounding landscape.

For example, the Institute has just announced a major new program for highly talented, early career scientists. It's an initiative we hope will inject some much-needed optimism into a research community dispirited by the dim prospects of being funded by the National Institutes of Health. The scientists we are targeting—those within two to six years of their first appointment as an assistant professor or equivalent position—are often at a high point of their creativity but face daunting odds in winning stable funding for their research. As we move into year five of flat budgets at the NIH, our colleagues there are concerned about the issue and are trying to address it but lack the flexibility we enjoy.

The HHMI initiative comes at a critical moment for the nation, and we're fortunate to be able to respond in a meaningful way. Having said that, we're mindful that nonprofit organizations face a surfeit of opportunities to respond to gaps in federal funding. They must exercise care in deciding when to intervene, or they risk dissipating that flexibility. We balanced that appropriate caution against the views of scientists who believe the situation is dire—in other words, if someone seems to be drowning, you throw that person a life preserver and debate the finer points about whether the sea is rising due to global warming at a later date.

The opportunity to act decisively to stimulate biomedical research and science education makes being president of HHMI a unique position in scientific leadership. Yet, as many readers of this column already know, I will step down from this extraordinary position a year from now to return to my laboratory at the University of Colorado on a full-time basis. This decision reflects my desire to be fully engaged in research and teaching but also the realities of charting new strategic directions for HHMI.

The Institute is beginning to plan its next scientific initiatives, and I think new leadership should be in place before those are launched. As I have shared with HHMI staff, continuity of leadership was very important for building the Janelia Farm Research Campus. The same leadership team was involved in the entire process—beginning with the early vision that developed from a conversation I had with Gerry Rubin, now Janelia Farm's director, and David Clayton, now vice president for research operations—through to program planning, architectural design, construction, staffing, and the emergence of a lively scientific community. The “next great thing” deserves that same leadership commitment over an extended period of time.



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This is an exciting moment in HHMI's history, and I look forward to the outcomes of several initiatives now under way. For example, we're in the final stages of selecting a new group of investigators, the result of our first general competition in which scientists applied directly to HHMI. The process of soliciting institutional nominations worked well in the past, but direct applications are bringing us a broader and deeper pool of candidates. The open application process is stimulating our long-term efforts to expand the definition of biomedicine to embrace interdisciplinary work involving chemists, physicists, engineers, and computer scientists.

Under the leadership of Jack Dixon, HHMI's chief scientific officer, we're undertaking another initiative called the collaborative innovator awards to further interdisciplinary research and extend HHMI's support into the wider scientific community. For the pilot round, we asked our investigators to propose particularly challenging and potentially transformative research opportunities that involve collaborators outside the HHMI community and to devise plans for tackling them. We hope to select the first recipients shortly; as the effort proceeds, we will consider expanding the program to a larger group of scientists.

The work of HHMI will continue to unfold over the next year as the Trustees seek my successor, who will have the responsibility and joy of planting new ideas and watching them flower. I will have the privilege of returning to a cherished role, that of an HHMI investigator, and the joy of discovery.