

Fighting racial inequity by funding Black scientists

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Representatives from a network of women deans, chairs and

distinguished faculty in biomedical engineering are calling upon the National Institutes of Health and other funding agencies to address disparities in allocating support to Black researchers. The group made the call to action in the Jan. 26, 2021, issue of the journal *Cell*.

In examining the racial inequities and injustices that prevent Black faculty from equitably contributing to science and achieving their full potential, insufficient federal [funding](#) for research by Black scientists rose to the top as a key issue.

According to studies of National Institutes of Health research funding allocations, Black applicant award rates have stood at about 55 percent of that of white principal investigators of similar academic achievement. Despite internal reviews of the reasons behind this [disparity](#), and promises to do better, the funding gap continues.

Efforts have been made to improve the educational pipeline to encourage Black students to prepare for and enter careers as researchers and college and university faculty. But once they have faculty positions, lack of research funding can derail their careers. Many universities review faculty members' ability to support their research as part of decisions on tenure and promotions. In this way, NIH and other agencies' funding disparities can jeopardize the careers of Black scientists. Without adequate research funding, these scientists can become discouraged and leave their professions.

This means that fewer Black scientists remain to serve as role models and mentors for the next generation. It also means that many research questions vital to society are not being asked, because the perspectives, creativity, and knowledge of a diverse population of scientists are not being tapped. The public is also less likely to see the faces or hear the voices of Black scientific experts speaking on important issues.

The authors of the paper made several recommendations on how research funding disparities can be eliminated. Among the steps [funding agencies](#) might take are:

- Explicitly state that racism persists in the United States research enterprise and that it must be expelled
- Develop federal funding institute policies to immediately achieve racial funding equity
- Incorporate diversity into research proposal scoring criteria, prioritize research teams that exemplify diversity, and diversify proposal review panels
- Train funding agency leadership and staff, and grant reviewers and recipients, to recognize and stop racism

"Scientific colleagues, let us each use our voices and actions to now overcome our profession's racism and serve as antiracist agents of change," the *Cell* article authors wrote.

The authors also suggested ways individual scientists and universities, colleges and institutes can act to bring about social justice. These recommendations include recognizing how they might be unintentionally contributing to systemic racism in their academic roles. Academia, they noted, must move forward from statements of solidarity to transformative organizational changes

In closing, the authors look also to the [private sector](#), such as foundations, professional societies, philanthropists as well as to industrial leaders whose companies depend on scientific innovation, to help offset racial disparities in research funding. The biotech company Genentech is held up as an example of leadership in reducing racial disparities in science, with its creation of a research funding awards program for Black scientists.

Together, private and public sectors can enhance the creativity and innovation of science and advance the greater good of society by funding innovative ideas and robust talents of Black scientists.

More information: *Cell* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cell.2021.01.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cell.2021.01.011)

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