

HHMI APPLICATION STRATEGY WORKSHOP — SUMMARIZED Q&A

Date: July 22, 2026 | Summary generated from the cleaned workshop transcript

This document distills key takeaways from the HHMI Application Strategy Workshop into eight themes, merging the panel discussion and Q&A so no point repeats. Panelists: Theanne Griffith, Ph.D., Elisa Zhang, Ph.D., Neil Hunter, Ph.D., and Siobhan M. Brady, Ph.D. (UC Davis HHMI Investigators and Freeman Hrabowski Scholars); Erica Chédin, Ph.D. (Director, SOM Grants Facilitation); and Matt Boitano (Director, Foundation Engagement). Facilitated by Adriane Joo, Ph.D.. See the companion transcript for full quotations.

1. Navigating the NIH-to-HHMI Transition

Panelists agreed the central challenge is shifting from a detailed, aims-driven NIH mindset to a broader research vision, while avoiding overly speculative framing.

- Write as though the funding is already unrestricted — not tied to specific aims or a renewal timeline.
- Group research into two or three broad, interrelated directions instead of itemized aims; each roughly the scope of one R01.
- Review sample funded applications on the HHMI portal to calibrate scope and tone.
- The award provides \$500,000 a year for years one through five and \$600,000 a year for years six through ten.
- UC Davis's Development and Alumni Relations team, within Foundation and Corporate Engagement, offers one-on-one application support. HHMI will post application component details by September 15, 2026, for the current Freeman Hrabowski Scholars competition.
- Eligibility for Freeman Hrabowski Scholars (at most seven years as an independent lab head, within the December 15, 2019 – December 15, 2026 window for the current cycle) is tied to faculty start date, not receipt of an R01 — confirmed by HHMI's published eligibility criteria.

2. Articulating a Distinctive Scientific Vision

Panelists emphasized organizing the application around a unifying theme, clearly situating the work within the field, and using significance statements to convey impact.

- Use a unifying analogy or theme to tie research directions together.
- Anchor bold new directions in prior work — show existing strengths applied to a new direction.
- Explain why a gap exists in the field and why your lab is positioned to close it.
- Cite generously, including competitors' work; reviewers penalize applicants who seem to overlook the field.
- Use significance statements or "in a nutshell" summaries to argue why prior work was novel and transformative.

- Preliminary data should show you have the tools and expertise to do the work, not proof it will succeed.
- Example: reframing sensory neurons as drivers of broader physiological processes, not just detectors — “more than movement, more than muscle, more than motion detectors.”

3. Funding Overlap and Concurrent Awards

HHMI funding is not intended to replace federal funding, and panelists confirmed there is no formal restriction on holding NIH or other awards concurrently.

- HHMI funds the person, not the project — overlap with NIH or NSF awards (R01, R35/MIRA, K01, CAREER) is expected.
- Panelists have held multiple concurrent awards, including continuous NIH funding since 2009 and an NSF CAREER Award held alongside Freeman Hrabowski funding.
- FYI: A Freeman Hrabowski application can convert directly into an NIH Pioneer or MIRA application with little change.
- Additional federal or foundation awards can strengthen an application, especially near the later end of the eligibility window.

4. Publications and the Review Process

HHMI review is designed to be blind to journal placement.

- Journal names may not appear in applications or slides.
- Renewals are reviewed on revised preprints, not final published articles.
- Reviewers weigh scientific impact and boldness, not publication venue.

5. Scientific Leadership and the Deletion Test

HHMI’s “deletion test” — whether the same questions would be answered on a similar timeline without this investigator — was described as central to demonstrating leadership.

- Identify a major open gap in the field and claim it as yours to close.
- Leadership shows through the full application package — CV, narrative, and how sections reinforce each other — not a single statement.
- HHMI looks for either exceptional work in an established area or a genuinely new angle.
- Test your “deletion test” pitch on peers inside and outside your field, and revise until convincing.
- For tool- or technique-driven work, explain how the method answers a question that could not be addressed before.

6. Inclusive Leadership, Lab Culture, and Institutional Support

Panelists noted that HHMI's language has shifted from "DEI" toward "inclusive leadership and mentorship," and stressed that this section of the application is reviewed seriously and should be supported with concrete examples.

- HHMI has moved away from the term "DEI" for legal reasons, but the emphasis on inclusive leadership and mentorship remains.
- Culture-and-climate materials are reviewed separately from the science; a weak section can hurt an otherwise strong application.
- Concrete mentoring examples, including difficult situations, are more persuasive than general statements.
- HHMI runs periodic, anonymous lab climate surveys — not currently tied to funding decisions, but taken seriously.
- Broader service and community contributions beyond direct mentorship are valued.
- Existing institutional resources and collaborations strengthen an application; UC Davis assets include the National Biomedical Research Institute (formerly CNPRC), the medical school, and the veterinary school.

7. Embracing High-Risk, High-Impact Science

Because NIH grants generally require preliminary data, panelists described HHMI as a rare opportunity to propose genuinely risky science and openly acknowledge the chance of failure.

- Unlike NIH grants, HHMI applications do not require completing every proposed aim — the vision can adapt over time.
- It is acceptable to state directly that an approach is unproven and may fail.
- A track record of past risk-taking demonstrates capacity for bold science.
- HHMI's flexibility lets investigators follow promising, unplanned observations.

8. The HHMI Experience Beyond Funding

Beyond financial support, panelists highlighted the HHMI community, meetings, and leadership training as significant benefits.

- Annual meetings let investigators bring one or two trainees into a cross-disciplinary network.
- The community connects investigators outside their field, encouraging bolder approaches to science.
- Leadership training, including required workshops and optional one-on-one coaching, is a distinctive benefit.

A full, lightly edited transcript of the workshop discussion and Q&A is available as a companion document.