Howard Hughes's next president: 'Promote under-represented groups in science'

Erin O'Shea talks to *Nature* about her plans for the Howard Hughes Medical Institute in Maryland.

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James Kegley/HHMI

Erin O'Shea

Erin O'Shea, a biochemist at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, will from September this year become the sixth president of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) in Chevy Chase, Maryland — one of the richest biomedical research organizations in the world.

O'Shea, who studies the way cells sense and respond to changes in their environment, already serves as the HHMI's vice-president and chief scientific officer, and will be its first female president. She talks to *Nature* about what lies ahead for the institute, which has spent almost US$8 billion over the past decade on research and science education.

What are your priorities for the HHMI?
Continuing to fund people not projects. A lot of the best science comes from giving people the flexibility and freedom to work on whatever problems they want to work on. Another thing is trying to be more inclusive about science — enhancing diversity in the scientific workforce.

As the HHMI's first woman president, do you feel a special responsibility to raise the profile of female scientists?
Before I got this job, I didn't think much about what it means to be the first female president. This process of being selected has made me realize that to many people, including many of the female investigators, this is a momentous occasion. Overall the HHMI investigator population is only about 20% women. One could say, in this day and age, it shouldn't be a big deal that a woman is in charge of the institute. But it is a big deal. You have to accept reality.

I will try to build on the achievements that past HHMI presidents have made, and I'll bring my own perspective to the mission. One of my priorities is to be intentionally inclusive, to catalyse greater success for scientists who come from different backgrounds and different career stages. That includes women and under-represented minorities. It also includes early-career scientists. This spring, we will announce a programme for women and other groups that are under-represented in science — a type of career-development transition award. That's one step in what I think will be many activities to promote under-represented groups in science.

Do you want to expand the HHMI's activities into any new fields?
I'm particularly interested in trying to foster initiatives to encourage research at the interface between medicine and biology. We're learning a lot from the study of patients in clinical trials, for example, and that is feeding back into biology. There's really a shortage of people who are knowledgeable about basic biology and medicine, and we need to do something to create a better pipeline in that area, as well as fostering research.

With the Janelia Research Campus, the HHMI was ahead of the curve on developing imaging technologies and tools to study the brain. What's the next big thing you see coming?
That will be a task for the next few years — to define the vision for the next phase of Janelia. We need the next ten-year plan.

How would you describe your management style?
If you asked ten people what my management style is, the first adjective they would use would be 'direct'. I am direct. I tell people what I think.

What part of being president are you most excited about?
Just continuing to work with the spectacular people at the HHMI. It's a first-class operation. They're really motivated by the mission, and strive for excellence all the time. That, to me, is different to the environment at a typical university. The other thing I look forward to is

working with other philanthropic organizations to expand and enhance our impact.

Is there any part of the job that makes you apprehensive?
Striking a balance between the effort I spend on my own research lab and this job will be challenging. That's the thing that worries me, my ability to juggle those things.

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