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The philanthropic principle

Government and industry create the majority of scientific jobs. But over the past few years, non-profit research institutions, funded by philanthropists, have boosted employment — especially in the United States.

There is, for example, the Stowers Institute for Medical Research in Kansas City, Missouri, which only opened its doors in 2000, but which this year announced plans to house another 20 research groups — doubling its capacity (see overleaf). And the high-profile Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) this week began recruiting 24 group leaders for its forthcoming Janelia Farm Research Campus in northern Virginia.

Both of these sites are interesting, not just for their billions of dollars in endowments, but for the strikingly different career paths they create. The Stowers provides start-up funds, but encourages its investigators to win grants; it also has a tenure-track system in place and has recruited gradually. The HHMI-funded Janelia scientists, by contrast, may be forbidden to compete for US National Institutes of Health grants, will be given fixed-term, renewable appointments and will mostly be signed up before Janelia opens in 2006.

That is one advantage of foundation-funded research institutions: they can try different models, and adjust as necessary. They are also less susceptible to political and economic pressure. For example, Stowers scientists can pursue stem-cell research, even though the Missouri state government will not fund such activities. And scientists at both campuses are less dependent on federal funds, and so less affected by small dips in the economy — although the founding trusts still need a fairly stable stock market to thrive.

With philanthropic ventures such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation becoming increasingly interested in science funding, the outlook for jobs in foundation-funded centres seems bright.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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