

2021 Call for Proposals

Letter of Intent Deadline: June 16, 2021 (3 p.m. ET)



Health Equity Scholars for Action

BACKGROUND

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is dedicated to building a national Culture of Health that enables all in our diverse society to lead healthier lives now and for generations to come. To this end, RWJF supports research to identify and address the root causes of health inequities in the United States, recognizing that they are strongly linked with structural and systemic racism and other forms of oppression. We believe that this research agenda is best advanced by a diverse academic workforce that encompasses varied perspectives and lived experiences, in order to challenge biases and conventions in research and academia; promote innovation; and train future generations of scholars.

Yet the scholarship of individuals from certain communities, especially Black individuals; Indigenous people; people of color; individuals from low-income communities; individuals with disabilities; LGBTQ+¹ individuals; non-native English speakers; first generation college graduates—and individuals who identify with more than one of these groups—has not been adequately supported in academia.^{I-III} Structural racism and discrimination have created obstacles for many qualified individuals when starting or advancing in an academic career path. Once on a tenure track, faculty from these backgrounds are often compelled to take on duties to support initiatives related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (sometimes referred to as a “minority tax”^{IV}), taking up time and energy that could otherwise be devoted to one’s own career development. Biased methods of assessment and evaluation for tenure, and other forms of unfair treatment, can also lead to disparities in advancement and promotion.^{V, VI}

We recognize that many researchers from historically underrepresented backgrounds (HURs) are affected by these issues. Those who are interested in conducting research on population health, health equity, and well-being by focusing on the root causes of health disparities also frequently encounter a lack of funding for these topics. Furthermore, since HURs tend to be underrepresented in health sciences, as well as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), many junior faculty in these fields may not have mentors who understand their lived experiences within their institutions.^{VII} This makes it difficult for HURs pursuing academic careers to develop a professional network and community of support within their fields or disciplines. A guiding principle of RWJF is that “we seek bold and lasting change rooted in the best available evidence, analysis, and science, openly debated.” This initiative, Health Equity Scholars for Action (HES4A), is designed to enhance the support, resources, and community necessary for participants to thrive professionally and personally, and in turn be better able to contribute to and expand health equity-related research and evidence that can help build a Culture of Health.

THE PROGRAM

The goal of HES4A is to support the career development and academic advancement of HURs conducting health equity research. Grants will be awarded to address the challenges that HURs typically experience, and help them

¹ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning; or an umbrella term used to refer to the community as a whole.

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overcome obstacles to earning tenure. Grants will support three aspects of career development: 1. Research, 2. Mentorship, and 3. Connection with a community of support.

Research

Through its signature research programs, RWJF has supported research on a wide variety of topics including housing, education, criminal justice, food and nutrition, paid leave and labor policies, health services and payment models, and COVID-19-related policies and interventions. RWJF prioritizes research on policies, systems, programs, or practices that have the potential to address the root causes of health disparities and improve population health and well-being. As part of the HES4A grant, scholars will dedicate a portion of their time to a research project that reflects the spirit of one or more of these signature programs:

- [Evidence for Action \(E4A\)](#) funds research that establishes evidence of causal relationships between interventions and population health and well-being outcomes. *Interventions* are defined broadly to include programs, policies, and practices, including those outside the domain of health care services or public health practice.
- [Policies for Action \(P4A\)](#) funds research that builds the evidence base about how policies can improve health and well-being and decrease inequities in the United States. *Policies* refer to laws and regulations at the federal, state, and local levels, and private-sector practices that have implications for families and children, workplaces, neighborhood conditions, and community development.
- [Systems for Action \(S4A\)](#) funds research to rigorously test new ways of connecting the nation's fragmented medical, social, and public health systems. Studies test mechanisms of aligning delivery and financing systems across sectors with a focus on health equity.

Applicants can learn more about each program's funding portfolio on their respective websites. Examples of previously funded projects are meant to illustrate the types of research topics and approaches that align well with RWJF's emphasis on systems and policy impacts. However, they are not intended to be an exhaustive list of acceptable topics or approaches to building a Culture of Health—nor are they representative of the size and scope of projects meant to be conducted by HES4A scholars. Applicants are encouraged to propose research on other relevant and related topics and questions, as long as they present a strong rationale for how these topics relate to systems, policies, programs, or practices that have the potential to improve population health and/or equity.

Studies funded through this call for proposals will need to be completed within a two-year time frame. Research and evaluation methods and designs that are acceptable include, but are not limited to, natural experiments, implementation research, micro-simulation studies, randomized control trials, linkages and analyses of existing data sources, mixed-methods analyses, and qualitative research. New sources of data can also be proposed and analyzed. Studies may be conducted as standalone projects or as part of larger existing studies or trials underway. Projects involving community-based participatory research (CBPR) approaches are welcome.

Note that RWJF views evaluation as a tool to advance equity, and all studies that are evaluations should apply principles of the [Equitable Evaluation Framework™](#).

Mentorship

Each scholar selected for the program will be matched with a technical mentor and/or a career coach to help them develop and strengthen technical skills, explore career opportunities, and foster networks of support and accountability within their fields, depending on their needs. In some cases, both the technical mentor and career coach roles may be filled by the same individual, if appropriate.

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- The technical mentor will usually serve as the primary mentor, and will spend more time with the scholar, playing the key role of research advisor.
- The career coach is intended to complement the role of the technical mentor; as a leader in the scholar's field, this person will provide opportunities for professional exposure and career advancement.

The matching of scholars with mentors/coaches will be provided by a team at Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, who will also oversee these relationships to ensure they adequately meet the scholars' needs. Compensation for technical mentors and career coaches will be provided in addition to the grants awarded to the scholars themselves.

Applicants are strongly encouraged to also involve a home institution advisor, if they have one, to play an additional role of supporting the scholar in navigating dynamics and conditions specific to the scholar's institution. We expect that this relationship will minimize conflicting expectations scholars may encounter at their home institution and their participation in HES4A. The advisor will be asked to write a letter of support describing their commitment to supporting the applicant's professional advancement within their institutions. **Applicants will not be penalized for not having a home institution advisor, and they will not be given an advantage in the selection process if they have one.**

Community of Support

Scholars will have access to activities and events organized by RWJF, E4A, P4A, and S4A program offices, as well as additional programming through the newly developed Health Equity Research Learning Collaborative (HER-LC), which will launch in the summer of 2021. HER-LC is a professional network of researchers, public health practitioners, and funders committed to advancing the health equity research field. By participating in activities offered through this collaborative, scholars will have an opportunity to develop networks of support and career development opportunities, as well as professional and technical skills. Some of these activities may include (but are not limited to) webinars, training, workshops, and HER-LC member meetings.

TOTAL AWARDS

- Grants of \$250,000 each will be awarded through this program. Funds will cover up to 70 percent of the scholar's salary for two years (capped at \$75,000 per year), with the remainder of the award to be used for research and other related expenses. See frequently asked questions for details.
- Up to 15 grants will be awarded.
- Grants will be for 24 months in duration.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

To be eligible for HES4A, the individual applicant must:

- Be from a systematically marginalized group that has historically been underrepresented in research disciplines. The term "systematically marginalized" refers to the challenges facing individuals because of their race, ethnicity, gender expression or sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or similar factors. Eligible individuals include, but are not limited to:
 - Individuals from ethnically and racially minoritized groups underrepresented in research disciplines
 - First-generation college graduates
 - People for whom English is not a native language

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- People from low-income communities
- LGBTQ+ individuals
- Individuals with disabilities

These examples are intended to be illustrative, not exclusive. Applicants who do not fall within one of these categories, but who believe they meet this eligibility criterion, will have an opportunity to describe their individual circumstances as part of the online application process.

- Have completed a doctoral degree within the last five years. The degree can be in any field and is not limited to public health or health sciences.
- Be a junior faculty member in an accredited school in the U.S. or its territories ("home institution"), with a full-time academic position that could lead to tenure, or a postdoctoral fellow poised to be in such a position by the start of the grant.
- Have a home institution that agrees to administer and receive the grant. The home institution must be an accredited academic institution. Applicants from any universities classified among the R2-M3 by the [Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education](#) are strongly encouraged to apply.
- Have never served as a project director or principal investigator on any grant since receiving their doctoral degree. Individuals who have been awarded grants to support predoctoral training or have received a predoctoral fellowship grant are eligible to apply. See frequently asked questions for further clarification.
- Not have received support from other post-graduate research fellowships/traineeships (e.g., NIH K award, or equivalent). Investigators are not prevented from applying to other fellowships/ traineeships while participating in the program.
- Be a U.S. citizen, permanent resident, or granted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services at the time of application. As federal policy or laws change, we may need to consider adjustments in eligibility and grant terms.
- Not be related by blood or marriage to any Officer or Trustee of RWJF, or be a descendant of its founder, Robert Wood Johnson.²
- Federal, state, tribal, and local government employees are eligible to apply unless they are considered government officials under Section 4946 of the Internal Revenue Code.³

² The Officers are the Chair of the Board of Trustees; President and CEO; Chief of Staff; Executive Vice President; General Counsel; Secretary; Assistant Secretary; Treasurer; Assistant Treasurer; and Chief Investment Officer of the Foundation.

³ For these purposes, a government official is defined as any person who holds one of the following:

- An elective public office in the executive or legislative branch of the Government of the United States.
- An office in the executive or judicial branch of the Government of the United States, appointment to which was made by the President.
- A position in the executive, legislative, or judicial branch of the Government of the United States—(A) which is listed in schedule C of rule VI of the Civil Service Rules; or (B) the compensation for which is equal to or greater than the lowest rate of basic pay for the Senior Executive Service under section 5382 of title 5, United States Code.
- A position under the House of Representatives or the Senate of the United States held by an individual receiving gross compensation at an annual rate of \$15,000 or more.
- An elective or appointive public office in the executive, legislative, or judicial branch of the government of a State, tribe, possession of the United States, or political subdivision or other area of any of the foregoing, or of the District of Columbia, held by an individual receiving gross compensation at an annual rate of \$20,000 or more, and a significant part of whose activities include "the independent performance of policymaking functions."
- A position as personal or executive assistant or secretary to any of the foregoing; or
- A member of the Internal Revenue Service Oversight Board.

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SELECTION CRITERIA

Proposals will be reviewed by a committee composed of RWJF staff, alumni from the former RWJF New Connections program, staff and advisory committee members at national program offices, and other expert reviewers as needed. Final funding decisions are made by RWJF. RWJF does not provide individual critiques of proposals submitted.

Letters of intent (LOIs) will be evaluated on the basis of:

- Eligibility in accordance with the above criteria;
- Potential for this program to influence the trajectory of the scholar's academic career;
- Relevance of the proposed research topic to one or more RWJF signature research program (E4A, P4A, and S4A) aims;
- Relevance of research question to building a Culture of Health;
- Feasibility of the proposed research (e.g., plan for access to data, populations, or research settings).

Additionally, *full proposals* will be evaluated based on:

- Applicant's ability to clearly describe and justify the research design and methodology. If the applicant lacks experience with the proposed design or methodology, the applicant should specify a plan for developing the necessary skills and expertise to carry out the research.
- For evaluation studies, alignment with principles of [equitable evaluation](#). Applicants should demonstrate that they intend to implement approaches that reflect the principles of equitable evaluation whenever possible, including approaches to defining research questions and conducting research;
- Significance and relevance of the applicant's previous training, research experience, and interests to the proposed project. If the applicant is proposing a project that reflects a shift from the applicant's prior research agenda, the applicant should explain how that shift will advance his, her, or their career;
- Demonstrated progress toward scholarly engagement and dissemination (e.g., publications, presentations, or other forms of communication); and
- Applicant's description of how mentorship and other opportunities offered through this program would support career growth and professional development.

As we select the scholars, we will carefully consider the composition of the overall cohort selected in terms of demographics; geographic location; disciplines; and educational background to ensure that the selected scholars have an opportunity for a rich training experience within their cohort. Consideration will also be given to the number of individuals from one home institution within a selected cohort.

OUR EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION COMMITMENT

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is committed to building a Culture of Health that provides everyone in America a fair and just opportunity for health and well-being. Achieving this goal requires focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion. To that end, we are committed to fostering diverse perspectives. We recognize that individuals' perspectives are shaped by a host of factors, such as their race, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, age, socioeconomic status, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, familial status, education, religion, legal status, military service, political affiliation, geography, and other personal and professional experiences.

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We know that the presence of diverse perspectives alone is not sufficient. Therefore, we also are committed to creating inclusive environments where all individuals are encouraged to share their perspectives and experiences. We believe that only through valuing our differences and similarities, and remaining vigilant in advancing equity, will we be able to maintain an equitable workplace and actively pursue equity in all aspects of our work. We commit to being continuous learners and working alongside others to cultivate equity, diversity, and inclusion.

SCHOLAR EXPECTATIONS

The following are expectations for all HES4A scholars:

- Collaboration with RWJF program officers and other HES4A scholars to identify and leverage potential synergies across scholar projects and to disseminate results broadly.
- Regular meetings with technical mentor and career coach.
- Active participation in research collaboration and translation activities offered through HER-LC.
- Participation in other activities organized by RWJF and other program offices (P4A, E4A, and S4A) including, but not limited to, webinars, blogs, podcasts, research meetings and presentations, and policy briefings.
- Participation in periodic progress check-ins throughout the grant period with RWJF staff overseeing the program.
- Attendance at annual scholar convenings. If held in person, travel and hotel costs to attend will be covered by RWJF.

EVALUATION

The purpose of evaluation at RWJF is learning rather than accountability. An independent research group selected and funded by RWJF will conduct an evaluation of the program. RWJF intends for this project to contribute to national efforts to promote a Culture of Health. Therefore, the program will publicly release results from this evaluation. As a condition of accepting RWJF funds, scholars must participate in the evaluation, which may include assisting with necessary data collection efforts (i.e., surveys and interviews) to accomplish the evaluation objectives.

MONITORING

RWJF monitors the grantees' efforts and careful stewardship of grant funds to assure accountability. Grantees will be required to submit periodic narrative and financial reports.

APPLICANT SURVEY PROCESS

The Principal Investigator (PI) of the application will be contacted after the submission deadline by SSRS, an independent research firm. The PI will be asked to complete a brief, online survey about the application process and applicant characteristics. This voluntary questionnaire will take no more than 15 minutes to complete. Responses provided to SSRS will not impact the funding decision for the applicant in any way.

SSRS will protect the confidentiality of the applicants' responses. RWJF will not receive any data that links an applicant's name with their survey responses.

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USE OF GRANT FUNDS

Grants made to participating institutions will be in accordance with RWJF's funding guidelines. The grant funds provided to the institutions under the program cover the scholars' annual stipends and health insurance, and expenses associated with their research and travel. In keeping with RWJF policy, grant funds may *not* be used to support clinical trials of unapproved drugs or devices, to construct or renovate facilities, for lobbying, or as a substitute for funds currently being used to support similar activities.

OPEN ACCESS

In order to ensure RWJF-supported research is made accessible to a wide and diverse audience, grantees who publish findings in peer-reviewed publications must do so in open access journals and/or must include funds in their budgets to cover the cost of making the resulting publications open access (typically \$2,000–\$5,000 per manuscript).

HOW TO APPLY

Applications for this solicitation must be submitted via the RWJF online system. Visit www.rwjf.org/cfp/hes4a and use the “Apply Online” link. If you have not already done so, you will be required to register at my.rwjf.org before you begin the application process.

There are two phases in the competitive proposal process:

Phase 1: Letters of Intent:

Applicants must answer some eligibility questions and submit a letter of intent consisting of a narrative and supporting materials that describe their eligibility and their proposed research project. The letter of intent should include:

1. Information on applicant's eligibility
2. Statement of impact
3. A brief (2-page) plan for the two funded years, outlining a clear rationale for the research, the research approach and activities, and plans for dissemination
4. Curriculum vitae for the applicant

Phase 2: Full Proposals:

Selected applicants from Phase 1 will be invited to submit a full proposal, which should include:

1. Proposal narrative (6–8 pages)
2. Curriculum vitae and letter of support from home institution advisor, if available
3. Detailed budget and budget narrative
4. Project time line
5. Summary of scholarly engagement and dissemination history
6. Optional supporting documents

A group of semifinalists will be invited to participate in web-based interviews that will occur in September 2021. Finalists for the program will be selected after all interviews are complete.

Please direct inquiries to:

Sheldon Oliver Watts, PhD, MPH, *program officer*

Phone: (609) 627-5846

Email: HES4A@rwjf.org

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All applicants should log in to the system and familiarize themselves with online submission requirements well before the final submission deadline. Staff may not be able to assist all applicants in the final 24 hours before the submission deadline.

RWJF does not provide individual critiques of applications submitted.

PROGRAM DIRECTION

Responsible staff members at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation are:

- Sheldon Oliver Watts, PhD, MPH, *program officer*
- Martina Todaro, MPA, *research associate*
- Mateusz Szalda, CPA, MAcc, *program financial analyst*

KEY DATES AND DEADLINES

- **May 4, 2021 (12–1 p.m. ET)**
Optional applicant webinar. Registration is required [through this link](#).
- **June 16, 2021 (3 p.m. ET)**
Deadline for receipt of letters of intent.
- **July 21, 2021**
Invitation to select applicants to submit full proposals.
- **September 1, 2021 (3 p.m. ET)**
Deadline for receipt of full proposals.
- **Mid-September 2021**
Semifinalist interviews via web conference.
- **Mid-October 2021**
Notification of finalists.
- **December 1, 2021**
Program begins.

Applicant Deadline Policy

All letters of intent and proposals for this solicitation must be submitted via the RWJF online system. Visit www.rwjf.org/cfp/hes4a and use the “Apply Online” link. If you have not already done so, you will be required to register at my.rwjf.org before you begin the application process.

All applicants should log in to the system and familiarize themselves with online application requirements well before the final submission deadline. Please note that, in the 24-hour period leading up to the application deadline, staff may not be able to assist all applicants with any system-related issues. Therefore, we encourage you to submit your proposal well before the deadline so that any unforeseen difficulties or technical problems may be addressed in advance.

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Late submissions will not be accepted for any reason. While late submissions will not be accepted, RWJF may choose, at its sole discretion, to extend the application deadline for all applicants. Such extensions generally will be granted only in the event of: (1) a verified issue with the RWJF application system that prevented completion and submission of applications; or (2) a disaster, emergency, or significant internet outage that affects one or more regions. For purposes of this policy, a region is generally considered to be one or more states.

RWJF strives to give all applicants any support needed to successfully submit their proposal prior to the deadline. Submission is defined as all sections completed, marked finished, the proposal “submit” button used, and the proposal status shows “Submitted.” If the deadline is extended for any reason, the extension will be posted on the Funding Opportunities page at [rwjf.org](https://www.rwjf.org). In addition, an email will be sent to all individuals that have started an application in the RWJF online system.

REFERENCES

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- VI. Bilimoria D, Stewart AJ. “Don’t ask, don’t tell”: The academic climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender faculty in science and engineering. *NWSA J*. 2009;21(2):85-103.
- VII. Zambrana RE, Ray R, Espino MM, Castro C, Douthirt Cohen B, Eliason J. “Don’t leave us behind”: The importance of mentoring for underrepresented minority faculty. *Am Educ Res J*. 2015;52(1):40-72. doi:10.3102/0002831214563063

ABOUT THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION

For more than 45 years, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has worked to improve health and health care. We are working alongside others to build a national Culture of Health that provides everyone in America a fair and just opportunity for health and well-being. For more information, visit [rwjf.org](https://www.rwjf.org). Follow the Foundation on Twitter at www.rwjf.org/twitter or on Facebook at www.rwjf.org/facebook.

Sign up to receive email alerts on upcoming calls for proposals at [rwjf.org/manage-your-subscriptions.html](https://www.rwjf.org/manage-your-subscriptions.html).

50 College Road East
Princeton, NJ 08540-6614