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# Gender gap is wide in research funds, study shows

By Priyanka Dayal McCluskey | GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 15, 2015

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A stark gender gap persists at Boston's big biomedical research institutions, where young male scientists receive more than twice as much in funding to support their work as female colleagues, according to a study.

The findings, published Tuesday in the Journal of the American Medical Association, said male scientists beginning careers as faculty researchers received a median of \$889,000 in startup funding from their employers, while women received just \$350,000.

Startup money is critical for young scientists who are establishing labs, allowing them to buy equipment and hire workers until they can apply for other grants from government agencies and foundations.

"The difference was striking," said Dr. Robert Sege, vice president of Health Resources in Action, a Boston nonprofit, who led the study. "Men early in their careers get far more funding from their research institutions than women."

The results are especially concerning given Boston's role as a global hub for biomedical research and a major destination for scientists, Sege and other specialists said.



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The gender gap, they added, also has implications for how women advance in careers in science and medicine.

The gap is the worst at the largest hospitals and universities — those receiving more than \$120 million in federal research funding annually, according to the study.

The study examined more than 200 researchers at 55 hospitals, universities, and other research institutions in New England from 2012 to 2014.

The study did not name any organizations. But according to the National Institutes of Health, the Massachusetts institutions that receive the most federal research dollars are Massachusetts General Hospital, Brigham and Women's Hospital, Harvard Medical School, Boston Children's Hospital, and the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

If women get less money than men initially, that makes it harder for women scientists to publish findings from their research and attract grant money throughout their working lives, said Nancy Hopkins, a retired professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who has studied women in academia.

“These are the things that make your career hard or easy,” said Hopkins, who was not involved in the JAMA study. “[Women] are going to have to work harder to make up for that.”

The study helps answer why women do not advance in science at the same rate as male colleagues, added Dr. Karen M. Freund, a professor at the Tufts University School of Medicine. “This study provides one of the pieces of that puzzle.”

Susan A. Slaughaupt, scientific director of the Mass. General Research Institute, said she was concerned by the findings and said Mass. General, which got more than \$320 million in NIH funding this year, should examine how startup packages are awarded.

The packages are usually negotiated confidentially between researchers and department heads, she noted.

“There isn’t any transparency there,” Slaughaupt said. “At the hospital, we need to look at it closely.”

As in the broader workplace, part of the reason for the disparities might be that women, unlike men, tend to accept compensation packages without negotiating, specialists said.

Mary Gehring, for example, fielded several offers before taking a job in 2010 as an assistant professor of biology at MIT and a member of the Whitehead Institute, a research institution in Cambridge. But Gehring, 39, didn’t negotiate startup funding for her lab.

She said she feels fairly treated and well paid, but acknowledged, “I actually don’t know if [I] had a good startup package. You don’t find out what other people get.”

Executives at research institutions say they have taken steps to promote the careers of qualified women. Mass. General, for example, has a grant program designed specifically for women in their “child-rearing years.” UMass Medical School in Worcester is one of several institutions that have hired more women to leadership positions; six departments are chaired by women, up from just one department that was led by a woman in 2007, said Dr. Terence R. Flotte, dean of the medical school.

“They’re still underrepresented,” he acknowledged, “but it’s progress.”

Dori Schafer, hired as an assistant professor of neurobiology at UMass Medical School this year, said that thanks to strong woman mentors, she negotiated a startup package of more than \$1 million, money to hire staff for her lab and buy costly equipment, including a \$350,000 microscope.

“I’ve gotten the impression that women don’t stand up for themselves and negotiate and say, ‘No, I need this,’ as much as they should,” said Schafer, 36. “It’s getting better, but I think it’s part of the problem.”

Executives at research institutions said they welcomed the study’s findings but said more research must be done to determine why the pay gap is occurring.

“The burden is on all of us to identify what is the cause of [the disparities] and what are the strategies we have to deal with it,” said Dr. Anne Klibanski, chief academic officer at Partners HealthCare, the parent company of Massachusetts General and Brigham and Women’s hospitals.

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