



URA Virtual Research Policy Forum

The Role of Philanthropic Investment in University Research

May 14, 2026

Forum Report

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Executive Summary

The fifth Universities Research Association (URA) biannual virtual Research Policy Forum was held on May 14, 2026. Consistent with the broader goals of the forum series, to convene discussion around trends, challenges, and opportunities shaping the research enterprise, the program focused on the evolving role that philanthropic investment plays in university research.

The following report synthesizes the key themes that emerged throughout the discussion, composed with the aid of AI. The Appendices then include the agenda and similarly generated summaries from the individual presentations by our speakers from Research Corporation for Science Advancement, The Ohio State University, the Simons Foundation, Arizona State University and ASU Foundation, the Heising-Simons Foundation, the University of Tennessee Research Foundation, and the Science Philanthropy Alliance. [*Videos of the presentations are available on the URA Research Policy Forum webpage.*](#)

Across the presentations, speakers described a research funding ecosystem undergoing a significant transition, shaped by increasing uncertainty in federal support alongside the growing, though still limited, role of philanthropy. For decades, U.S. scientific leadership has relied on a strong partnership between federal agencies and research universities, with philanthropy serving a complementary, catalytic role. Several speakers emphasized that this model is becoming increasingly strained. Federal funding remains the largest source of research support, accounting for roughly half of total support, but its relative share has declined over time and faces continued volatility, administrative complexity, and potential reductions. At the same time, scientific opportunity is accelerating, driven by advances in data, artificial intelligence, and large-scale infrastructure, creating both urgency and opportunity for new funding approaches.

Philanthropy has emerged with a more visible and strategic role within the research ecosystem. Its flexibility, speed, long-term perspective, and risk tolerance make it particularly valuable in

supporting early-stage, interdisciplinary, and high-risk research that can be difficult to sustain through traditional federal mechanisms. Many examples demonstrate how philanthropic investments can seed transformative ideas, build research communities, and catalyze larger-scale efforts. However, a consistent theme across presentations is that philanthropy cannot replace federal funding at scale. Rather, its greatest impact comes from complementing public investment, filling strategic gaps, and helping launch innovative research efforts that can later grow through broader support.

Universities are responding to this shifting landscape by rethinking how they organize research partnerships and engage with external stakeholders. Several presentations described a shift toward more integrated, institution-wide models that align corporate engagement, foundation relations, and research development and advancement strategy within more coordinated structures. This transition reflects both financial realities, given the declining predictability of federal funding, and opportunity, as institutions seek to position themselves more effectively within evolving industry ecosystems, philanthropic priorities, and regional innovation networks. At the same time, speakers acknowledged ongoing internal challenges, including the need to bridge cultural and operational divides between research administration and fundraising functions, while building more scalable and sustainable partnership models.

The growing demand for philanthropic support is also reshaping institutional behavior across the research enterprise. As competition for federal funding intensifies, Faculty are increasingly pursuing philanthropic opportunities, creating greater demand for training, institutional coordination, and strategic engagement with funders and their priorities. At the same time, philanthropic organizations are evolving their own approaches, placing greater emphasis on proactive relationship-building, targeted investments, and collaborative funding strategies designed to maximize impact. Data presented by the Science Philanthropy Alliance further underscored that philanthropy, including both current giving and legacy endowment support, now constitutes a substantial share of the research funding landscape, while also reinforcing the need for robust data, transparency, and analytical tools to guide long-term decision-making and planning.

The presentations pointed to emerging opportunities to broaden and diversify support for research through alumni engagement, entrepreneurship networks, and partnership models that connect funding with expertise, mentorship, and innovation pathways. Across sectors, speakers shared that sustaining scientific progress and U.S. competitiveness will require more coordinated, flexible, and collaborative approaches.

Looking ahead, the future research ecosystem will likely depend on deeper collaboration among universities, government, philanthropy, industry, and individual stakeholders, alongside continued institutional adaptation and renewed efforts to communicate the societal value and impact of scientific research.

Key Takeaways

- Federal funding remains the foundation of the U.S. research enterprise but growing uncertainty and long-term funding pressures are reshaping institutional planning and scientific priorities.
- Philanthropy plays a critical but complementary role, excelling in flexibility, speed, risk-taking, and supporting early-stage and interdisciplinary innovation.
- The long-standing “philanthropy seeds, government scales” model is becoming increasingly strained, requiring new approaches to sustaining large scientific initiatives.
- Universities are increasingly adopting more integrated and institution-wide partnership models to align research development, corporate engagement, philanthropy, and engagement.
- Competition for philanthropic funding is rapidly increasing, creating greater demand for faculty support and training, coordination, and timely engagement with external funders.
- Collaboration across foundations, universities, industry, and federal agencies is becoming increasingly important to advancing scientific impact, building research communities, and leveraging resources effectively.
- Improved data, transparency, and analytical tools around funding flows are increasingly important for long-term strategic planning and decision-making across the research ecosystem.
- Universities continue to face internal cultural and operational challenges, particularly in bridging traditional divides between research administration and external partnership functions.
- Alumni, entrepreneurs, and non-traditional stakeholders represent a growing and still untapped source of research support, particularly when institutions connect scientific work to societal impact through effective storytelling and relationship-building.
- Sustaining U.S. scientific leadership will require more coordinated, cross-sector investment approaches to how research is funded, organized, communicated, and connected to broader societal and economic priorities.

Communicating the public value and societal impact of research is becoming increasingly important as universities and scientific organizations work to strengthen public trust, broaden stakeholder engagement, and sustain long-term support for science.

Appendix 1. Forum Agenda



URA Research Policy Forum on The Role of Philanthropic Investment in University Research

Thursday, May 14, 2026, 11:00 am – 2:30 pm EDT
virtual via Zoom

Agenda

- 11:00 ET Welcome, John Mester, URA President and CEO
- 11:05-11:40 Eric D. Isaacs, President and CEO, Research Corporation for Science Advancement
- 11:40-12:00 *One Ohio State: An Integrated Framework for Industry Sponsored Research and Philanthropy*
Luiza Newlin-Lukowicz, Associate Vice President for Corporate and Foundation Engagement, The Ohio State University
- 12:00-12:35 Gregory Gabadadze, Professor of Physics, New York University, and Senior Vice President for Physics, the Simons Foundation
- 12:35-12:55 *Reflections from the Frontlines: Research Philanthropy at ASU*
Michelle Govani, Assistant Vice President, Arizona State University Foundation, and
Lara Ferry, President's Professor and Vice President for Research, Arizona State University
- 12:55-1:30 Gabriele Betancourt-Martinez, Science Program Officer, Heising-Simons Foundation
- 1:30-1:50 Maha Krishnamurthy, President, University of Tennessee Research Foundation
- 1:50-2:25 *Science Philanthropy Indicators*
France A. Córdova, President, Science Philanthropy Alliance
Kate Lowry, Strategy Director, Science Philanthropy Alliance
- 2:25-2:30 Outlook and closing

Appendix 2. Presentation Summaries

Summary: *Science Foundations in Tumultuous Times*

Eric D. Isaacs, President, Research Corporation for Science Advancement

Key Takeaways

- Philanthropy offers speed, flexibility, and risk tolerance that complement, but cannot replace, federal research funding.
- Federal funding instability and administrative complexity are increasingly constraining innovation, especially for early-stage ideas.
- Strategic philanthropic investments often seed transformative projects and enable high-risk research that later scales with public funding.
- Growing collaboration among foundations is improving coordination and amplifying impact across the research ecosystem.

The presentation examines the evolving role of scientific philanthropy within a shifting research funding landscape marked by both uncertainty and opportunity. A central theme is the growing instability of federal science funding, which has historically served as the foundation of U.S. research through a longstanding partnership with universities. Increasing volatility in federal budgets, administrative burdens, and risk-averse funding structures are creating challenges for sustaining innovation, particularly for early-stage and high-risk ideas. At the same time, scientific advances -such as AI, large-scale data generation, and major research infrastructure- are accelerating, creating a moment of both disruption and possibility.

Philanthropic organizations are reassessing how they can adapt and respond more strategically and effectively. Foundations are distinguished by their flexibility, speed, and willingness to take risks, allowing them to support unconventional, early-stage, or interdisciplinary ideas that may struggle in more constrained federal systems. They can also pivot quickly, fund exploratory or “high-risk, high reward” work, and reduce bureaucratic hurdles for researchers. However, the presentation emphasizes that philanthropy is not a substitute for federal investment; rather, it plays a complementary role, particularly in seeding new ideas and supporting emerging scientists.

Examples illustrate how philanthropic funding has catalyzed major scientific advances, from early investments in large-scale facilities like the Vera Rubin Observatory to collaborative, cross-foundation initiatives in areas such as particle physics and quantum science. The growing influence of individual philanthropists is also highlighted, bringing new resources but sometimes diverging from traditional scientific priorities. Increased coordination, such as through the Science Philanthropy Alliance, is helping reduce fragmentation and enhance collective impact.

Ultimately, the presentation argues that the research enterprise must adapt to a new reality in which federal dominance is less certain. Sustaining U.S. leadership in science will require stronger

collaboration among academia, government, and philanthropy, along with a renewed commitment to bold, long-term investment in fundamental research and the next generation of scientists.

Summary: *One Ohio State: An Integrated Framework for Industry Sponsored Research and Philanthropy*

Luiza Newlin-Lukowicz, Associate Vice President, Corporate Foundation Engagement, The Ohio State University

Key Takeaways

- Ohio State University created a centralized Corporate and Foundation Engagement model to unify previously fragmented approaches to external partnerships.
- Integrating research funding and philanthropy within a unified strategy enables more coordinated, flexible, and partner-responsive engagement.
- Early outcomes show increased funding and stronger institution-wide positioning with major corporate and foundation partners.
- Implementation depends on organizational alignment, shared data systems, and staff roles capable of bridging internal units and external relationships.
- Ongoing challenges include staff cross-training and rebuilding campus trust, highlighting the importance of communication and cultural change.

This presentation describes the development and early implementation of a new engagement model at Ohio State University designed to strengthen partnerships with corporate and foundation stakeholders in a rapidly evolving research and funding environment. While Ohio State already maintains a strong national standing in industry-sponsored research and philanthropic support, university leadership recognized an opportunity to better align more strategically with accelerating regional economic growth and emerging partnership opportunities. The result was the establishment of a centralized office for Corporate and Foundation Engagement, designed to move the university from a fragmented and parallel structure toward a more unified, institution-wide strategy.

Under the previous structure, separate teams handled corporate philanthropy, foundation relations, and industry-sponsored research independently, often leading to uncoordinated or duplicative interactions with external partners. The new model consolidates these functions into a centralized team that better integrates research, philanthropy, and external partnership efforts. Operating with dual reporting lines to both the research enterprise and advancement, the office acts as connective tissue across the university, enabling a “one Ohio State” approach. This structure supports more coordinated and data-informed engagement strategies that consider external funding opportunities more holistically while remaining responsive to partner interests.

Implementing the model required significant organizational change, including team integration, process alignment, and development of a more unified and coordinated data system. Staff is assigned both external partner portfolios and internal academic unit responsibilities, ensuring accountability while maintaining centralized coordination. The model also emphasizes multiple engagement pathways, enabling partnerships to evolve from philanthropy, research, and broader institutional collaboration.

Early outcomes suggest increased funding across corporate and foundation sources, along with an improved ability to present more unified institutional strategies to major external partners. At the same time, the effort continues to evolve, particularly in cross-training staff across funding types and rebuilding trust with academic units after prior structural changes. Key enablers of progress include strong leadership alignment, careful planning and timing, and deliberate communication. Overall, the initiative reflects a broader strategic shift toward more integrated and scalable engagement with external partners in support of long-term institutional growth and research competitiveness.

Summary: *Grantmaking in Physical Sciences at the Simons Foundation and Simons Foundation International*

Greg Gabadadze, Professor, NYU and Senior Vice President for Physics, The Simons Foundation

Key Takeaways

- Philanthropy plays a complementary role in federal funding, emphasizing flexibility, long-term support, and interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Large, multi-institutional collaborations are a central strategy for advancing complex scientific questions and building research communities.
- Coordinated efforts among foundations, research institutions, and federal agencies can significantly amplify the impact and reach of scientific investments.
- Targeted and high-risk funding approaches enable innovative experiments and efficient use of existing research infrastructure.
- Investments in people, global partnerships, and rapid-response programs strengthen the long-term resilience and future capacity of the scientific enterprise.

This presentation outlines how the Simons Foundation approaches its role in supporting basic science and mathematics within a changing funding landscape, emphasizing its complementary role alongside federal agencies. A central premise is that philanthropy cannot replace federal funding but can play a distinctive and strategic role in complementing it. To maintain this complementary role, the foundation focuses on areas where it can operate with greater flexibility, including longer-term funding commitments, interdisciplinary research, and the ability to support

international and multi-institutional collaborations that may be more difficult to structure through federal mechanisms.

A defining feature of the foundation's approach is its emphasis on building durable research communities through large collaborative programs. These initiatives typically bring together groups of researchers across institutions and countries, supported over extended timeframes and at substantial funding levels. This model has enabled progress on complex, high-impact scientific questions, often at the intersection of disciplines, while fostering long-term networks of collaboration. The foundation also supports targeted projects, including experimental efforts that leverage existing infrastructure in innovative ways, as well as smaller-scale, high-risk experiments that can explore fundamental questions at lower cost.

Collaboration is a recurring theme, both with federal agencies and among philanthropic organizations. Joint initiatives with other foundations and partnerships with public funders demonstrate how coordinated investment can amplify impact and stimulate broader participation in emerging research areas. The foundation also engages the scientific community through advisory structures, convenings, and in-house research activities, enabling it to respond quickly to emerging opportunities and evolving priorities.

In addition to funding research, the foundation invests in scientific workforce development and global research capacity. Programs support early-career faculty, expand access for underrepresented regions, and respond to external disruptions, such as the pandemic or geopolitical crises. Recent efforts include initiatives to sustain and rebuild scientific activity in affected regions and to strengthen institutional pipelines for future researchers.

Overall, the presentation highlights a model of philanthropy that combines flexibility, long-term vision, and strategic collaboration to advance fundamental science within an increasingly complex global research environment.

Summary: *Reflections from the Frontlines: Research Philanthropy at Arizona State University*

Lara Ferry, Vice President for Research and President's Professor, ASU

Michelle Govani, Assistant Vice President, ASU Foundation

Key Takeaways

- Arizona State University is adapting to growing uncertainty on federal funding by expanding and integrating philanthropic support into its research enterprise.
- The traditional model in which philanthropy seeds innovation and government funding enables scale is becoming less predictable, creating new challenges for sustaining large-scale scientific efforts.
- Faculty interest in philanthropic funding has surged, increasing competition and prompting new training and support mechanisms.

- Internal university structures must evolve to bridge differences between research administration and fundraising and enable more coordinated engagement.
- Future success will depend on scalable, collaborative models that align universities and funders around shared goals and effective pathways to impact.

This presentation examines how Arizona State University is adapting its research enterprise and external partnerships in response to a changing funding landscape, with particular focus on the growing role of philanthropy. Grounded in a long-standing institutional charter centered on inclusion, public value, and societal impact, the university aims to align research and discovery more closely with community needs while maintaining leadership in interdisciplinary innovation. Historically, federally sponsored research has served as the primary driver of research activity, but increasing uncertainty in federal funding is prompting institutions to reassess how research is funded, supported, and scaled.

Philanthropy has emerged as a more significant contributor to the research enterprise, with notable growth in both the scale and visibility of philanthropic investments. These funds are enabling new initiatives, including large-scale interdisciplinary programs and emerging research areas. A central theme was the long-standing model in which philanthropy seeds innovative, high-risk ideas while federal funding enables broader scale and continuity. However, this model is becoming increasingly strained, raising questions about how large and complex research efforts will be sustained if federal support becomes less predictable. An example illustrating this dynamic is a compact X-ray laser initiative, where early philanthropic investment enabled proof-of-concept work that later attracted significant federal funding to advance the technology and its applications in areas such as biomedical research and energy science.

The presentation also highlights a growing faculty interest in pursuing philanthropic funding opportunities as competition for federal resources intensifies. This shift has increased competition and new challenges related to access, equity, and capacity, prompting universities to develop more structured training and engagement programs for faculty. At the same time, universities are being pushed to reconsider internal structures and workflows, as traditional distinctions between research administration and fundraising functions become less viable in an integrated funding environment.

Ultimately, the presentation underscores the need for new, scalable models of collaboration among universities, funders, and external partners. As philanthropy and federal funding roles continue to evolve, institutions must become more agile, coordinated, and partner-oriented, while continuing to adapt internally to support scientific progress and societal impact.

Summary: *Heising-Simons Foundation Science Program*

Gabriele Betancourt-Martinez, Science Program Officer, Heising-Simons Foundation

Key Takeaways

- The Heising-Simons Foundation focuses its science investment on targeted areas where philanthropic funding can have a meaningful impact rather than replicating large-scale federal efforts.
- A proactive, relationship-driven, and primarily invitation-based model enables the foundation to identify and shape high-impact research opportunities.
- Clustered grants and community-building initiatives help amplify scientific impact by fostering collaboration, shared infrastructure, and stronger research networks.
- Funding decisions prioritize alignment, added value, catalytic potential, and, when relevant, timeliness of investment.
- Strong, ongoing partnerships with universities -supported by clear communication, mutual understanding, and flexibility- are essential to effective philanthropic engagement.

This presentation provides an overview of the Heising-Simons Foundation's science program, with particular emphasis on how the foundation identifies funding priorities and collaborates with universities and research institutions. As a family foundation shaped by the active interests of its leadership, the organization funds across several domains, with its science program focused on fundamental research in areas such as astronomy, cosmology, physics, and climate science, alongside activities related to science communication and broad participation in these fields. Given its relatively modest scale relative to federal funders, the foundation's strategy is to focus on areas where targeted philanthropic investment can provide meaningful impact rather than replicate larger federal funding efforts.

A defining feature of the foundation's approach is its proactive, and primarily invitation-based funding model. Program officers play a central role in identifying promising opportunities through active engagement with the research community through conferences, site visits, collaborations, and ongoing dialogue with institutional partners. Ideas for funding often emerge from these interactions and are refined extensively before formal proposals are invited. In addition to individual grants, the foundation frequently supports coordinated clusters of projects organized around shared themes, helping foster collaboration, shared resources, and stronger research communities.

Funding decisions are guided by several key considerations, including alignment with program priorities, the ability to address gaps or provide unique value, catalytic potential, and, when relevant, the timeliness or urgency of an opportunity. The foundation prioritizes activities that strengthen scientific communities and networks, recognizing their importance in advancing both research outcomes and career development.

Strong partnerships with universities and national laboratories are critical to this model. Effective collaboration depends on clear, targeted communication, mutual understanding of priorities, and flexibility in addressing practical challenges such as indirect cost structures. The presentation highlights that the most successful engagements are built through sustained relationships, ongoing

information exchange, and shared effort to identify and develop impactful opportunities. Overall, the foundation's approach illustrates how focused, agile philanthropy can play a complementary role in advancing fundamental science.

Summary: *The Role of Philanthropic Investment in University Research*

Maha Krishnamurthy, President, University of Tennessee Research Foundation

Key Takeaways

- Alumni represent an underutilized but promising source of support for university research, beyond traditional giving areas such as students, facilities, and athletics.
- Effective storytelling that connects research to societal and real-world impact is critical for strengthening alumni engagement and investment.
- Targeted fundraising efforts can provide flexible, early-stage funding support that strengthens competitiveness for future external funding opportunities.
- Alumni can contribute not only funding but also expertise, mentorship, and commercialization support through structured engagement programs.
- Universities are still experimenting with models for alumni-driven research support, creating significant opportunities for innovation and shared learning.

This presentation explores emerging approaches to engaging alumni philanthropy in support of university research, drawing on examples from the University of Tennessee system. Traditionally, alumni engagement has focused on areas such as student support, facilities, and athletics, but universities are increasingly exploring ways to connect alumni engagement more directly to research. The University of Tennessee system, which includes multiple campuses and a large alumni base, is beginning to explore new ways to connect alumni more directly to its research mission, though this work is still in an exploratory phase.

A central theme is the importance of storytelling in making research more accessible and compelling to alumni audiences. Experiences such as featuring researchers at alumni advisory board meetings demonstrate that when scientific work is framed in terms of real-world impact, particularly through personal or societal relevance, it can resonate strongly with alumni and encourage both financial contributions and deeper engagement. Early fundraising efforts focused specifically on research, such as targeted "days of giving," have shown promising results, generating flexible funding that can support early-stage, high-risk projects and strengthening competitiveness for larger external grants.

Survey data further suggests that alumni interest in supporting research is meaningful but underdeveloped, with enthusiasm constrained more by limited understanding of research impact than by lack of willingness to contribute. This highlights a need for clearer communication about the value and impact of research, particularly in fields where outcomes are less immediately

tangible. In response, the university is exploring additional mechanisms to engage alumni, including initiatives that connect research with entrepreneurship, commercialization, and innovation.

One such approach involves building networks of alumni investors and entrepreneurs who can contribute not only funding but also expertise, mentorship, and connections to commercialization pathways. These types of interactions can help accelerate the translation of research into practical applications while strengthening ties between alumni and the broader research enterprise. Overall, the presentation emphasizes that while no definitive model yet exists, there is significant untapped potential in aligning alumni engagement with research, particularly through narrative, relationship-building, and creative forms of participation.

Summary: A Preview of the Science Philanthropy Indicators Report 2026

France A. Córdova, President, Science Philanthropy Alliance

Kate E. Lowry, Strategy Director, Science Philanthropy Alliance

Key Takeaways

- The Science Philanthropy Alliance supports the research ecosystem by advising funders, convening collaborations, and improving data on science philanthropy.
- Federal funding remains the largest source of research support, but philanthropy now represents a significant and growing component of the overall funding landscape.
- Philanthropic funding includes both current giving and substantial “legacy” support through university endowments.
- Declining federal funding relative to historical levels -and possible future cuts- pose risks to the long-term stability of the research enterprise.
- Philanthropy is most effective as a flexible, catalytic complement that enhances and leverages government-supported research infrastructure.

This presentation introduces the Science Philanthropy Alliance's work and highlights new data from its Science Philanthropy Indicators Report, offering a quantitative view of how philanthropy contributes to the broader research funding ecosystem. The Alliance's mission is to advance scientific discovery through philanthropy by advising funders, convening collaborations, and strengthening the infrastructure and knowledge base that supports science funding. Rather than directly funding research, the organization works to guide philanthropists, analyze funding landscapes, and foster coordination across a diverse and expanding community of foundations and individual donors.

A central focus of the presentation is the growing importance of data-driven understanding of science funding. The Indicators Report provides a comprehensive, longitudinal view of research and development funding trends, drawing on decades of federal data and applying a philanthropy-

focused analytical lens. This effort underscores the importance of improved data collection and transparency, as accurate information becomes increasingly important for identifying gaps, guiding investment strategies, and informing long-term planning across the research enterprise.

The analysis shows that federal funding remains the dominant source of support for university-based research, accounting for roughly half of total research expenditure. However, philanthropy—including both current giving and legacy funding through university endowments—now represents a substantial and growing share, exceeding one-fifth of total funding. Universities themselves are also contributing an increasing portion through institutional resources. At the same time, the federal share of research funding has declined relative to historical levels, and projected future reductions could significantly constrain available funding, potentially returning funding levels to those seen decades earlier.

The report also highlights important structural features of the research system, including the concentration of funding in life sciences, the critical role of federal support for graduate students and postdoctoral researchers, and the substantial contribution of international talent in the U.S. research workforce. Across these dimensions, the findings reinforce that philanthropy plays a vital but complementary role. Its greatest value lies in providing flexible, risk-tolerant funding that builds on, rather than replaces, the large-scale infrastructure sustained through government investment.