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\$30M committed to project aiming to address region's economic disparities

Heinz Endowments to support new CMU center

By Joyce Gannon
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The Heinz Endowments has committed \$30 million – the largest grant in the philanthropy's history – to fund a new collaboration between Carnegie Mellon University and the community that aims to eliminate social and economic disparities in the Pittsburgh region.

The endowments' grant, to be allocated to CMU over six years, will fund the launch of the Center for Shared Prosperity and establish an endowment to make the center "permanent and self-sustaining," said Grant Oliphant, president of the endowments.

CMU President Farnam Jahanian called it "a sweeping initiative" that will "address barriers to equity and foster economic empowerment."

The pandemic and rapid technological change have contributed to "a widening opportunity gap," Mr. Jahanian said in a memo distributed to CMU staff, faculty and students Wednesday.



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Guillermo Velazquez, executive director of the Pittsburgh Hispanic Development Corp., is among those named to a committee that will collaborate with the center.

The center "will leverage our unique expertise to help residents benefit from the innovation economy," he said, and undertake "real-world projects" on issues such as housing, education, transportation, health care, access to capital and technology fluency.

Illah Nourbakhsh, a professor of robotics at CMU and founder of the university's Community Robotics, Education, and Technology Empowerment (CREATE) Lab, was named executive director of the center.

Its agenda will be driven by a diverse, 37-member committee that includes staff

from CMU and the endowments, as well as representatives from nonprofits, schools and activist groups.

Among those named to the committee is Raqueeb Ajamu-Osagboro, founder and executive director of Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers of Pittsburgh Co-Op, a nonprofit that maintains an

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urban farm in Homewood and works in Black communities to grow and distribute healthy food.

“My aspiration for the center is to be able to work together in concert to create a sustainable reality where Pittsburgh is livable for everyone,” Ms. Ajamu-Osagboro said.

“This is a groundbreaking and inspiring...to have grassroots movements lifted to a protected space for consent,” she added.

Guillermo Velazquez, executive director of the Pittsburgh Hispanic Development Corp. and also a committee member, said the center’s launch will spur input from a range of community representatives who have “mutual interest in promoting equal access for all, which eventually translates into opportunities and advancement...and prosperity in the region.”

The nonprofit PHDC assists Latino entrepreneurs who want to start and grow firms and operates a business incubator at its Beechview headquarters.

The Center for Shared Prosperity will be based in CMU’s Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences but will be a “university-wide effort that will draw on the expertise and passion of the entire campus,” Mr. Jahanian said.

Like the CREATE Lab, it will use data-driven models to design projects that will be piloted locally.



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Raqueeb Ajamu-Osagboro, founder and executive director of the Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers of Pittsburgh Co-Op, was named to a community committee that will collaborate with the CMU center.

Updates about its work will be published online.

Mr. Nourbakhsh said in a statement that the center will be “a unique model of collaboration in which community members and university faculty and staff work together as peers...to dismantle barriers to shared prosperity and equity.”

CMU and the endowments have been discussing how to address socioeconomic disparities in the region for three years.

Soon after Mr. Jahanian was named CMU president in 2018, Mr. Oliphant said the pair began conversations about how the university could direct its

expertise in technology, innovation, public policy and creativity to “benefit the community.”

“It has struck us at the endowments that we’re living in arguably the most prosperous era in human history,” Mr. Oliphant said. “To a very real and damaging extent, that prosperity is not being shared with a broad range of people in our society and our own community.”

The endowments, the city’s second-largest philanthropy behind the Richard King Mellon Foundation, has assets totaling \$2 billion and distributes between \$70 million and \$80 million in grants annually.

Its largest grants prior to funding the new CMU center totaled \$20 million and include gifts to the Pittsburgh Symphony and to the H. John Heinz III Center for Science, Economics and the Environment, a nonprofit in Washington that closed in 2013.

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