

# Rales Foundation bets big on Carnegie Mellon STEM students

By THALIA BEATY February 22, 2023



A Carnegie Mellon University sign is displayed outside Baker Hall on the university's campus in Pittsburgh, June 7, 2019. Carnegie Mellon University and the Norman and Ruth Rales Foundation, named for a home-building supplies entrepreneur and his wife who built their fortune despite early struggles, hope a \$150 million initiative will support a new generation of students trying to achieve that American dream. (AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar, File)

Carnegie Mellon University and the Norman and Ruth Rales Foundation, named for a home-building supplies entrepreneur and his wife who built their fortune despite early struggles, hope a \$150 million initiative will support a new generation of students trying to achieve that American dream.

The foundation pledged \$116 million Wednesday, in addition to \$34 million from CMU, to endow scholarships for graduate students studying STEM from groups under-

represented in the fields, including racial minorities, women and first-generation college students.

Besides covering the cost of tuition, the scholarships include a stipend — even for master's students — dedicated faculty and other mentoring and career support for 86 students starting in 2024 at the Pittsburgh-based university.

“Both my parents believed deeply in creating more opportunity and social mobility for others, just as

they had in their lives and paying it forward, paying for their success,” said Josh Rales, president and trustee of the foundation, which is headquartered in Washington, D.C.

The gift represents more than half of the foundation's assets which were listed at \$221 million in 2020 tax data. It has funded education and scholarships previously, with annual grant disbursements between \$6-8 million in recent years, but had not made a gift to CMU before now.

Josh Rales and his brothers, Mitchell and Steven, who founded the life sciences conglomerate Danaher Corp., first started talking with CMU president Farnam Jahanian in the spring of 2021. In 2010, Danaher acquired a company Jahanian co-founded, but they were reintroduced by a CMU trustee, Jahanian said.

“We felt strongly, not only this is an important issue that the country needs to tackle because of its implication for our economic prosperity, for our global competitiveness, as well as our national security,” Jahanian said. “But it’s also very much aligned with the mission of the university to educate the next generation and provide access and opportunity for everyone.”

The foundation’s interest in funding the program came in part from Mitchell and Steven’s experience hiring for their company and seeing a need for more diverse voices in STEM fields, Josh Rales said. U.S. citizens and permanent residents, but not international students, will be eligible for the program, and the university will work with the Ron Brown Scholar Program, which grants scholarships to African American students, to identify candidates, among other recruitment efforts.

Student debt from undergraduate degrees, as well as delayed entrance into the workforce, are major reasons racial minorities and first-generation college students do not pursue graduate studies in STEM, Jahanian said. That helped lead him

to support providing stipends to all students in the program.

“If we didn’t make them available to also master’s students, we would miss the opportunity to really move the needle in this case,” he said.

Beyond the financial barriers, Black and Native American students specifically, may also be stereotyped and underestimated by professors and institutions, said Ebony McGee, a professor of education at Vanderbilt University, who wrote “Black, Brown, Bruised: How Racialized STEM Education Stifles Innovation.”

Programs that broadly recruit from all underrepresented groups — not specifically Black students, who along with Latinos are underrepresented among higher degrees in STEM — won’t reach the most marginalized populations, McGee said.

She also urged universities recruiting Black students to STEM to provide professors with training on how to mentor them, because many advise students that if they work hard enough, people won’t notice their race or gender.

“Just take as many STEM everything, do all the internships, make sure you have the right grades and your race or your gender doesn’t matter,” said McGee, adding that it’s a disservice to those students.

“You can’t just pretend that race or gender or the intersection of it is not there. That’s the first thing people see when they look at

you and they stereotype you because of that.”

Josh Rales, who has worked full time with the foundation since 2014, said it was humbling to try to make an impact in this field because the scale of need was so large but that as a result, they had decided to make fewer, bigger bets.

Every day when he walks into the foundation’s offices, he said, he sees a photo of his parents hanging on the wall, which he sees as a reminder that, “We better do a very good job because their name is on the line.”

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*Associated Press writer Brooke Schultz contributed to this report. Schultz is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a non-profit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.*

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