



Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine

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As HHMI professor, Avery August will aid biology transfer students

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Avery August, professor of immunology in the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine and incoming vice provost for academic affairs, has been named a [Howard Hughes Medical Institute \(HHMI\)](#) professor.

The awards are given to empower research scientists to convey the excitement of science to undergraduates, with an eye toward reforming undergraduate science education through innovative teaching that demonstrates the rigor and value of scientific research.

August is one of 14 recipients this year, including two collaborative awards, chosen from 177 proposals. Each HHMI professor will receive \$1 million over five years; the collaborative awards will receive \$1.5 million total.

August's project will address enhancing the research experience for transfer students in biological sciences at Cornell.

"Students from community college who transfer to Cornell into biology typically have spent two years at the community college, and when they come to Cornell, they are trying to maximize their time here," August said, adding that lack of prior exposure to research opportunities coupled with acclimating to a new environment puts these transfer students at a disadvantage. An absence of early research experience, for example, hurts them when they are applying to faculty labs at Cornell, and if they fail to get that experience in college, it further hurts them when they apply to graduate, medical and professional schools.

"When we look at the total proportion of students who do research at Cornell, it's quite high, at least in the biological sciences," August said. "When you break that down and look at students who have transferred, it's a much lower proportion. The idea of the program is to provide these students some early exposure to research in terms of basic techniques and opportunities here so they look more attractive to faculty who would be looking for undergraduates for their labs."

August's program will include a research-based course, Preparing Future Researchers, designed specifically for transfer students and currently under development, to be offered in fall 2018. The program will also facilitate some students to meet with faculty to explore research opportunities. And it will encourage these students to become peer-to-peer mentors, where they might advise others in their former community colleges on questions regarding the transfer process and what to expect at a university like Cornell.

August also has an interest in diversifying the sciences, and he chairs the steering committee for a meeting called the Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minority Students, one of the largest undergraduate meetings for minority students in the country. At that meeting, he sees a disparity in community college students who miss out on access to research and then don't have opportunities to present their work.

"If you look at the community college population, it's more likely to be underrepresented students than the general student population," he said. "So that was also a motivation" to propose this program to HHMI.

Over the course of his career, August has taught undergraduate immunology to more than 1,200 students and hosted 75 undergraduate students in his research lab.

August's lab is focused on signals that determine whether the immune system will develop an inflammation response in asthma, autoimmune disorders, allergic lung inflammation and infectious diseases. His lab also investigates factors that suppress inflammation and therapies for preventing or limiting inflammatory diseases.

By Krishna Ramanujan

[A version of this story appeared in the Cornell Chronicle.](#)

For more information on the other HHMI professors, [click here](#).