

Why racial disparities in NIH funding persist and what might fix the problem

by Melba Newsome, special to C&EN

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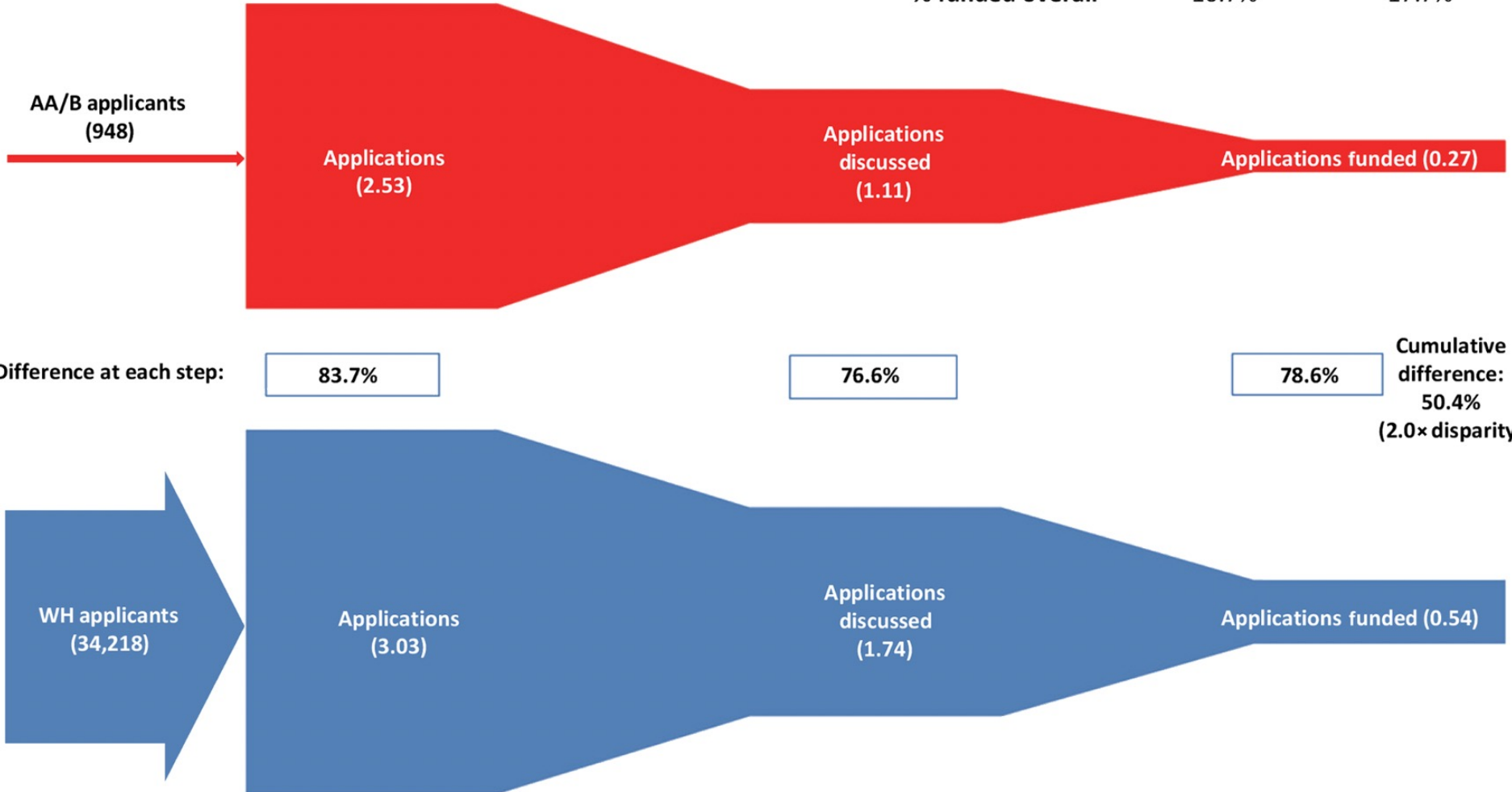
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Apps from AA/B investigators **Apps from WH investigators**

% discussed 44.0% 57.4%**

% of funded if discussed 24.2% 30.8%**

% funded overall 10.7% 17.7%**



18.5%

Award rate for White applicants

for US National Institutes of Health
standard independent research
project grants (R01s) awarded from
2014 to 2016

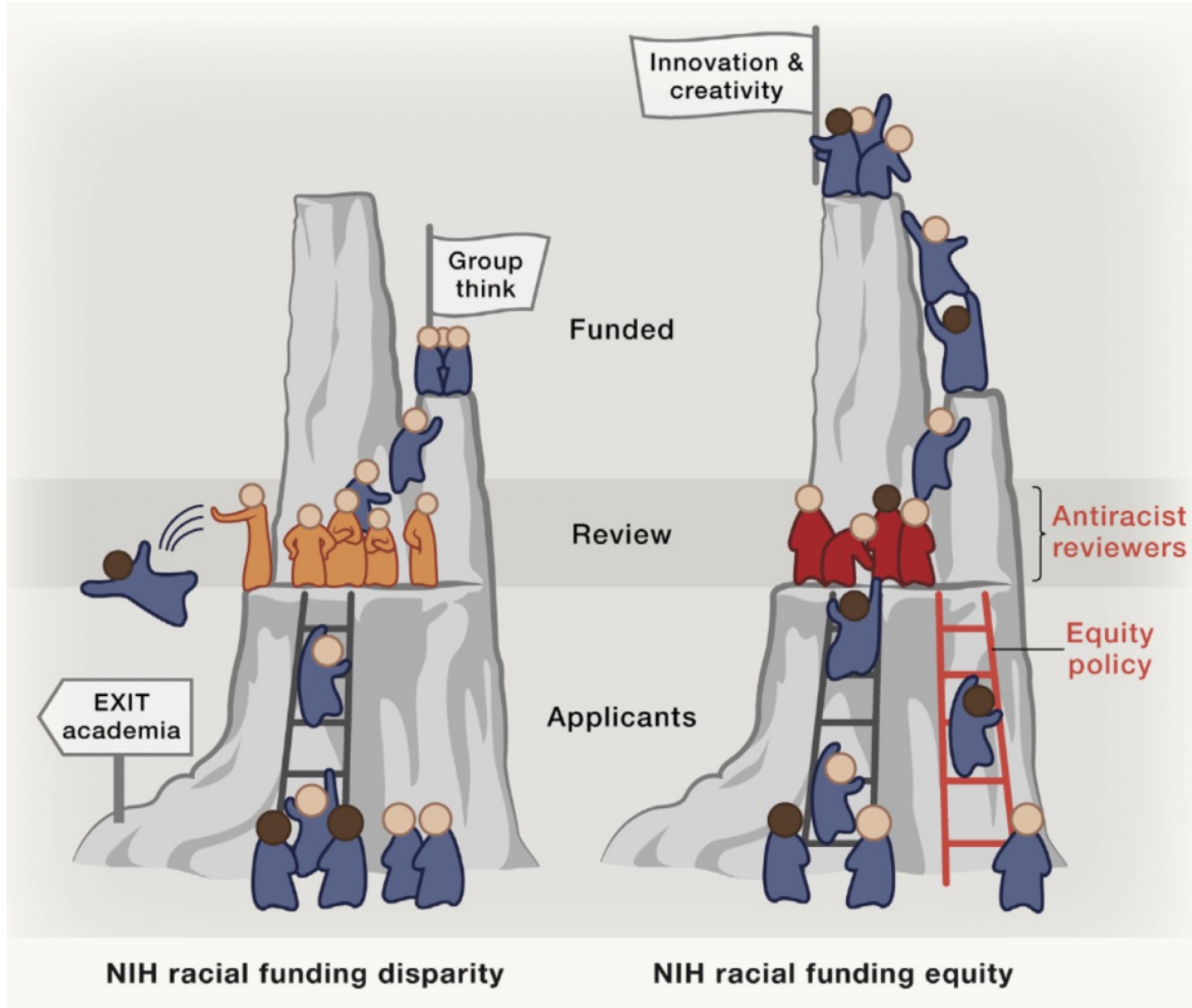
10.2%

Award rate for Black applicants

The commentary's authors calculated that in 2019 alone, inequitably awarded funds amounted to a **\$32 million** gap between Black and White researchers.

Why?

The review process.



What happened during the process?

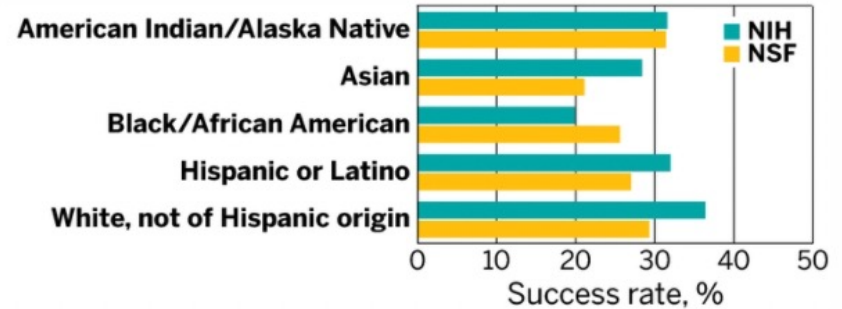
Botchwey, professor of biomedical engineering at the Georgia Tech, says that in his experience, the scoring sometimes **depends on the investigator more than the science**, with well-known or White PIs getting the benefit of the doubt. Reviewers sometimes comment that a **proposal lacks detail** but the **PI is a strong scientist and will figure it out**. He says that sometimes a project proposal from applicants from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups will be summarily dismissed, while very similar proposals from White PIs are reviewed favorably. **“The only difference is whose name is on it,”** he says.

Sherry Molock, an associate professor of clinical psychology at the George Washington University, says she knows why none of the grant proposals she’s written in the past 10 years have been funded: **research area**. Molock studies suicide prevention in Black adolescents and young adults.

Karmella Ann Haynes, an associate professor of biomedical engineering at Emory University, recalls identifying the **flawed science** in one proposal that was squarely in her area of expertise. **“I knew exactly what the person was trying to do, and a couple of these aims violated the basic rules** of the science,” she says. She gave the proposal a low score, and two other reviewers scored it highly. Haynes initially thought her fellow reviewers would reevaluate the proposal once she explained the flaw in the proposal, but **they refused to budge and ultimately approved the grant**.

Solutions

The NIH review process could benefit from copying the NSF process. Under the NSF process, grant proposals are evaluated both on **technical merit** and **broader impact**, such as how they might train more researchers, improve education, or build the workforce.



The NIH's funding gap between Black and White researchers could be eliminated if each of the NIH's institutes and centers awarded **two additional R01 grants** to Black researchers annually.

The NIH-wide **UNITE** was established to identify and address structural racism within the biomedical research enterprise, as well as bolster the efforts of the NIH offices involved in diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility.

The Faculty Institutional Recruitment for Sustainable Transformation (FIRST) program: aims to facilitate institutions in their building a self-reinforcing community of scientists, through recruitment of a critical mass of **early-career faculty who have a demonstrated commitment to inclusive excellence**.