U of M eclipses $50M in research awards for first time, bolstering its R1 push

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As University of Memphis EVP of research and innovation [Jasbir Dhaliwal](#) puts it, U of M faculty members are "thinking bigger."

For example, two years ago, he explained, they submitted around 75 research proposals that needed more than $500,000 in funding. This past year, faculty members submitted 128 requesting more than half a million dollars.

"There's [many] more proposals that are ambitious in nature," he told MBJ. "That's what's exciting for me."

Dhaliwal isn't the only one excited, as the ambition has helped U of M pass a new milestone — in FY 2021, it eclipsed $50 million in research awards for the first time.

According to meeting materials for the U of M Board of Trustees' Academic, Research, and Student Success Committee — which met on Aug. 25 — U of M received $50.23 million in research awards, continuing a pattern of recent year-over-year increases as it seeks to [gain R1 status from the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education.](#)

In FY 2019, U of M faculty members secured $32.59 million in research awards. In FY 2020, they received $40.76 million. The past year's go-round was enough for a year-over-year jump of 23%, and the funding came from federal, state, and local government sources and private grants, with federal funds making up 72% of the awards. State governments made up 17%, while private grants took another 6%, and local grants made up 5%.

The largest funds came from notable federal and state agencies. For instance, $8.91 million in awards came from the National Science Foundation (NSF) and $6.57 million came from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Another $5.16 million was earned from the U.S. Department of Education. Eight different federal agencies gave research awards worth more than $1 million, and U of M has seen an 80% increase in federal awards since FY 2019.

On the state level, U of M also received $5.65 million in research awards from the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) and $1.05 million from the Tennessee Department of Education.

Dhaliwal is quick to attribute credit to faculty members, as he believes the chance to gain R1 status — which would designate U of M a doctoral university with "very high research activity," and potentially bring widespread benefits to the school and city — has driven them.

"This is a celebration of our faculty efforts, stepping up to the research challenge, and making the University of Memphis a solid research school," he said. "They're the ones we want to celebrate."

Data does show that high-level research efforts have become more widespread across the institution. Three years ago, about 20% of faculty were responsible for 75% of research proposals. That number is now 38%.

And, Dhaliwal noted, in FY 2021, 20 different academic departments brought in at least $1 million in research awards.

"The number of faculty members who are stepping up is also going up," he said. "We're not relying on just a handful of supporters."

The increase in research awards bodes well for the school's R1 push, as the amount of research expenditures is a key part of gaining R1 status, and more awards lead to more expenditures. Because the updated list of R1 institutions will come out this fall, U of M has already submitted data for consideration, and the FY 2021 numbers won't be taken into account for the rankings.

However, once you gain R1 status, you must maintain it — the distinction can be lost — and new lists are released every three years.

So, while the $50.23 million won't help U of M for the 2021 rankings, it could help them for the 2024 rankings, as U of M is far from the only college jockeying for R1 status. It's a highly competitive process — and one Dhaliwal relishes.

"It's a wonderful, positive challenge," he said. "The onus is on us to take this seriously and work hard. The motivation is strong."

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