On Campus

Roy and Diana Vagelos Give $175 Million for New Institute for Biomedical Research Education

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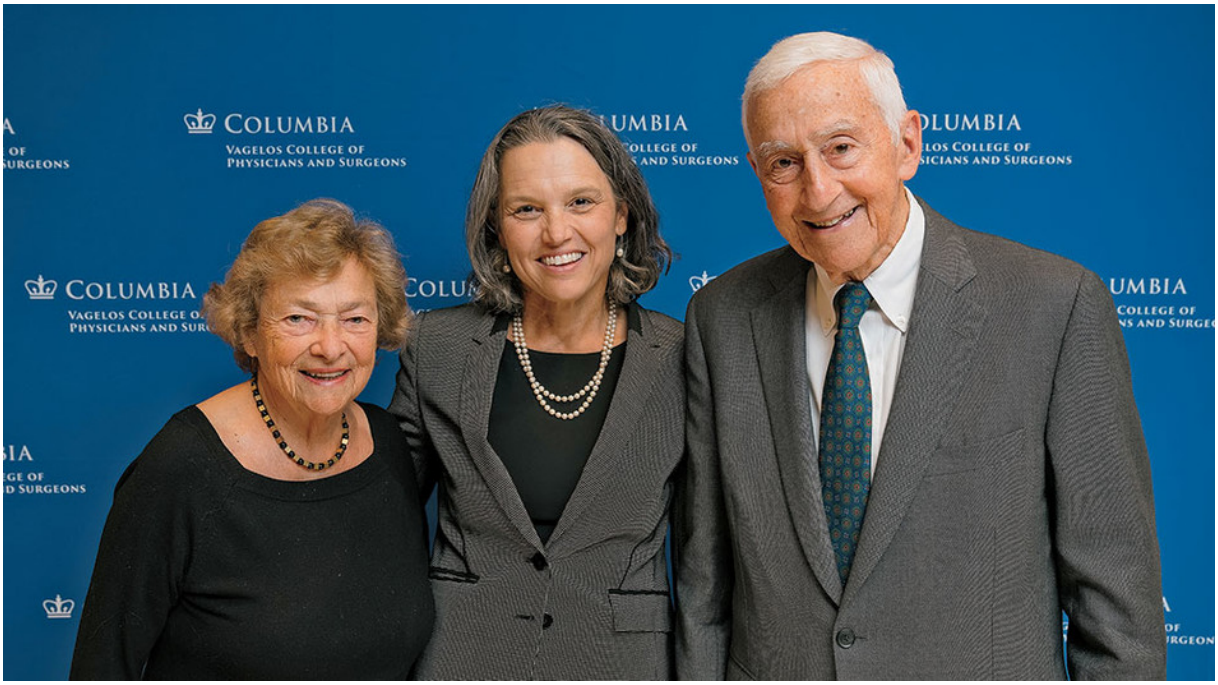

Diana Vagelos, Columbia medical-campus head Katrina Armstrong, and P. Roy Vagelos. (Brian Hatton)

Two of Columbia's most generous benefactors, P. Roy Vagelos '54VPS and Diana Vagelos '55BC, have given $175 million to the University to launch the Vagelos Institute for Biomedical Research Education. The institute will advance medical science and clinical care by expanding the ranks of PhD students and early-career physician-scientists engaged in research capable of producing breakthroughs in health care.

University officials say the institute is designed to address a problem that has prevented biomedical science from progressing more rapidly in the US, which is that

financial burdens and career incentives often dissuade young researchers from undertaking high-risk, high-impact projects. To encourage more students and junior faculty to tackle seemingly intractable medical problems, the institute will create an academic environment that rewards bold experimentation and intellectual risk-taking.

The largest portion of the Vageloses' gift — $125 million — will establish an endowment to support PhD students working in the biomedical sciences. The remaining $50 million will support early-career physician-scientists who do cutting-edge research at the intersection of fundamental biology and clinical medicine.

With their latest donation, the Vageloses have given more than $500 million to Columbia University. Their previous gifts include $250 million to the medical school in 2017, of which $150 million was allocated for scholarships. Together with scholarship support from many other alumni, friends, and faculty, the donation enabled the school to become the first in the nation to offer debt-free education to medical students and precipitated a national movement among medical schools to eliminate student debt. In a tribute to their impact, Columbia's medical school was renamed the Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons.

"We all know that continued scientific progress is the foundation for solving our most pressing medical problems," says P. Roy Vagelos, a physician, scientist, and former CEO of Merck. "The larger the number of talented researchers who are able to explore areas of discovery that capture their imaginations, the greater the impact they will have in changing medicine and improving health."

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