

Free the Vaccine

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You walk into your campus art gallery. In front of you, there's a white wall with a question in large type: Between 2010 and 2016, how many new FDA-approved drugs were developed with public funding?

Write your guess on a touch screen and wait for the correct response....

10%?

It couldn't be as high as 60%...

You enter 25%, which seems reasonable.

The answer appears: 100%

In a recent study of every FDA-approved drug developed between 2010 and 2016, all of them were supported by public funding.

But how can that be true? If innovative drugs aren't born in pharmaceutical corporations' private research and development labs, then how are they developed?

The United States invests over \$40 billion dollars annually in taxpayer funds from sources such as the National Institutes of Health and the Department of Defense. Most often these grants are given to University researchers doing the important preliminary work that advances basic science. When they discover something with exceptional promise, Universities then license their research findings to pharmaceutical corporations. The University receives payment from the corporation, and the corporation enjoys monopoly rights on the manufacture and distribution of the drug.

However, there's no requirement (yet) that public funding ensures the resulting lifesaving medications are accessible to and affordable for the public. Drug pricing policy is opaque, and takes advantage of monopolies and manipulations of patent law (from recent years you may remember Martin Shkreli, the cost of the Epi-Pen, or the rising cost of insulin). Vulnerable populations in the US often cannot afford the drugs created with their own tax dollars.

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Rather than waiting for pharmaceutical corporations to reduce their profits out of good will, Universities can right this wrong by changing their research licensing policies. But why are we having this conversation in an art gallery? And are we wearing face masks? We're in a pandemic, after all!

Exactly. In a public health crisis like the one we're experiencing now, these questions become all the more pressing. In the past four months, the US government has pledged *billions* for developing tests, treatments, and vaccines for COVID-19. But what good is this investment if the medical resources it funds aren't available to everyone? A global pandemic needs a global solution. Guaranteeing universal access to tests and treatment is crucial. And with the current death count over 600,000, from an ethical standpoint, it's simply the right thing to do. It's a big challenge. And big challenges require creative solutions.

So Free the Vaccine for COVID-19 launched in March of 2020. Led by Universities Allied for Essential Medicines (UAEM) and the Center for Artistic Activism (C4AA), more than 300 university students, artists, and activists from 29 countries joined forces to make sure that COVID treatments are available to everyone, everywhere, not just those with the ability to pay. It's not a conventional campaign – it's an “advocacy innovation lab.” Experts and mentors remotely train participants in methods of creative advocacy that draw from the social and behavioral sciences, the history of art and activism, and the world of advertising and public relations. In a highly collaborative and iterative process, teams of participants experiment with how to apply those methods in different regional and institutional contexts. It's a model for activism that's accessible, enlivening, and fun.

To date, the lab has produced dozens of projects. In Southern California, team members encouraged a friendly rivalry between UCLA and USC by making a set of trading cards that challenged researchers to be the first team to pledge to openly license their COVID research. Another group, inspired by Dolly Parton's donation to support COVID research at Vanderbilt, made [a music video about free vaccines, set to the tune of “Jolene”](#) – and it went viral.

These and other Free the Vaccine actions invite participants to harness their own creativity and cultural resources to make meaningful change.

As we wrap up the first 16-week round of the Free the Vaccine for COVID-19 advocacy innovation lab, we're taking stock of what we've accomplished and thinking of ways to invite more people into our experiment with creative activism. To achieve both of those things, we're making an exhibition.

The show introduces audiences to key issues that limit access to medicine and provides robust methods anyone can use to advocate for change from anywhere, especially at this time of social

distancing. It also serves as an archive for Free the Vaccine volunteers so they can reference and build on interventions past, present, and to come.

University communities are our primary audience for the show. Why? These institutions are home to essential COVID research and development – and they have the power to help make sure that life-changing medicine reaches the people who need it most. Adopting open licenses for COVID research findings is an easy way to support an institution’s mission and social responsibility.

We also know that university galleries are navigating their own challenges right now as they work to serve their communities while also limiting the further spread of COVID. That’s why we’re creating a virtual exhibition with optional physical components. University galleries can link to our show from their website and organize public programs that connect their audiences with current events and fresh creative work, even if gallery spaces are restricted. The interdisciplinary content of the show can bring together students, faculty, and staff across campus – from the art department to public health programs to scientific research labs. If it’s creativity versus COVID, we’ll be on the winning side.