The USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism has received a $5 million grant from the Annenberg Foundation to launch an initiative aimed at increasing access to journalism education and professional development for people from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds.

The new Annenberg Leadership Initiative will focus on supporting journalism students and young professionals from communities that are underrepresented in the news industry, USC Annenberg said.

“This generous gift speaks to The Annenberg Foundation’s unshakable and admirable commitment to diversity in journalism,” USC President C. L. “Max” Nikias said in a statement. “With newsrooms being reimagined for the digital age, and the breadth and shape of the news ever-changing, it is critical that young reporters and editors of different backgrounds be a part of the process. Such diversity encourages critical thinking, and critical thinking leads to more insightful journalism.”

The program will offer scholarships to students and fellowships to early-career journalists and will target those from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds currently underrepresented in journalism and communication industries, USC said. The Annenberg Leadership Scholarships will provide full tuition for three journalism graduate students per year, while the Annenberg Leadership Fellowships will provide three fellowships a year for working journalists from diverse backgrounds.

“We are building a new generation of technologically and journalistically skilled communicators who will lead the complex digital newsrooms of the future,” said Willow Bay, director of the School of Journalism. “These young professionals will enrich newsrooms with new voices and perspectives, and be a driving force in informing a broader audience.”

The Annenberg Leadership Initiative will also fund an expanded Community Reporting Initiative, to focus on identifying and meeting the needs of underserved communities.

“If we want a news industry that truly understands and covers all of America, then our news industry has to embody all of America,” said Wallis Annenberg, chairman, president and CEO of the Annenberg Foundation. “We have to attract the best and brightest of every race and ethnicity and economic background – we have to equip them with the most cutting-edge tools and skills so our news coverage can be just as inclusive and forward-looking.”

USC Annenberg said in the coming weeks, it will announce additional innovative programming funded by the Annenberg Leadership Initiative grant.

USC Annenberg has more than 2,000 students and offers doctoral, master’s and bachelor’s degree programs, as well as continuing development programs for working professionals.

USC said it has raised $4.6 billion in the four years since it launched its current fundraising campaign to raise $6 billion.
By Stefanie Garden

Calls for diversity have targeted every industry, and when it comes to Hollywood, the success of films such as Straight Outta Compton and television shows such as Scandal and Fresh Off the Boat reveal that there’s a thirst and an audience for diverse storytelling. Though some doors in the entertainment business are opening, many still appear closed. A report earlier this year from UCLA’s Bunche Center reveals that white men continue to dominate the field, including screenwriters, film directors, and awards show accolades. One particularly eye-popping statistic is that 94 percent of studio heads are white and 100 percent are male.

Of course, rising from aspirant to established filmmaker is difficult for everyone. One of the reasons is that there is no clear path. Someone who strikes out on his or her own might find success, and someone who gets a formal education in film school might not. And vice versa. As someone who attended film school, I can also say that it is very expensive, particularly at the graduate level, where substantial scholarships are few and far between.

In light of all of this comes news of a recent $10 million endowment from the George Lucas Family Foundation to support the “recruitment of talented USC School of Cinematic Arts students from communities that are underrepresented in the entertainment industry.” The gift will establish the George Lucas Foundation Endowed Student Support Fund for Diversity, which will provide financial support for African-American and Hispanic USC students. Support will be split evenly between male and females students who will be known as George Lucas Scholars or Mellody Hobson Scholars, respectively.

As Lucas puts it: “Hispanic and African-American storytellers are underrepresented in the entertainment industry. It is Mellody’s and my privilege to provide this assistance to qualified students who want to contribute their unique experience and talent to telling their stories.”

Lucas has been a strong supporter of his alma mater, giving a $175 million grant to USC’s film school in 2006, $75 million of which was used to rename and rebuild the cinema school. Lucas’ philanthropy has been especially focused on education, and we’ve written before about Lucas’ progressive approach to K-12 reform and his potential to make some major waves in that space.

Regarding Lucas’ latest gift, I couldn’t help but notice that a lot more funding has been pumped into making sure minority youth are prepared for, say, STEM than the arts. To be sure, this is true across the board, not just for underrepresented populations. And don’t get me wrong—making sure youth are well represented in math and science fields is critical, as is the prospect of strong career options. But the arts are also important, and it’s good to see one of Hollywood’s most prominent filmmakers injecting money into that cause.