



NATURAL SELECTIONS

A Newsletter of The Rockefeller University Community

Issue 8, September 2004

Sequence of Events

By Martin Ligr and Mary Abraham

On August 18, 2004, a campus-wide email sent by Amy Wilkerson, Associate Vice President for Research Support, announced the closure of the RU DNA Sequencing Resources Center by September 17, 2004, and outsourcing of sequencing service to an external company, GeneWiz Inc. This was news, not only to the scientific footfolk, but also to many principal investigators, whose immediate reactions ranged from guarded surprise to animated disbelief. Equally surprised were personnel of the Center, who learned about the closure a few days before the campus-wide memo was sent.

One primary reason given by the administration for closure of the RU DNA Sequencing Center was that the availability of outsourcing to provide an equivalent service removed justification for existence of this core facility. Amy Wilkerson explained: "A resource center can exist because the services and products are not commercially available, or commercially available at some exorbitant price, or if it is a service that requires true collaboration and is not feasible to do if it is geographically remote, or if it requires a certain timeliness. DNA sequencing has become more standardized and more high throughput. There are options outside that are commercially viable and meet the researchers' needs. If out-

sourcing occurs, it should have the same or less financial impact for the users, and should offer a comparable service."

Oligonucleotide synthesis is an example of a technique that was eventually outsourced, at RU and other universities, because the technology became routine, the equipment became more automated, and the process was ideally suited to be developed as a commercial venture. However, the swift closure of the RU Sequencing Center contrasts with the process of outsourcing of oligonucleotide synthesis at RU some years ago. We were told that the transition, from announcement to the closure of in-house oligonucleotide synthesis, took almost a year.

The company chosen by the administration to take over the sequencing service is GeneWiz Inc. of New Jersey. The company was founded by Zhong-Ping (Steve) Sun, a former RU postdoc. According to the email sent by Amy Wilkerson, the company is: "already used and highly regarded by a number of laboratories on campus."

Some of the main factors to consider about the consequences of a decision to outsource RU sequencing are: cost, speed, type, and quality of scientific services provided.

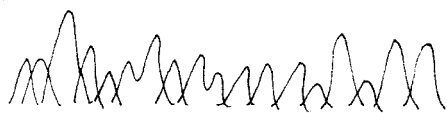
What are the financial consequences of outsourcing for the individual user getting sequencing done? Amy Wilkerson said that the contract was put out to competitive bidding and GeneWiz offered the lowest commercial price, a ##### the RU standard sequencing charge. The price for GeneWiz basic sequencing is \$### per sequencing reaction. The RU Sequencing Center in-house users pay \$7.00 per reaction, samples submitted in 96-well plates cost \$5.95 per reaction.

If a core facility can be outsourced, in a manner that the University considers to be scientifically and economically equivalent or better, we were told that there are also financial considerations at the level of the University. Last year the DNA sequencing center was self-sufficient for its direct costs and the income from sequencing charges covered the Center's staff salaries, staff benefits, service contracts and reagents. However, the administration told us that the DNA Sequencing Center did not recover its indirect costs: electricity, heating, the costs of the space such as insurance, and other overheads associated with running the space. Amy Wilkerson explained that these indirect costs of running a core facility are not covered by NIH grant money and must be paid for entirely from the University's main operating budget. We tried unsuccessfully to obtain from the administration a figure for the amount of the indirect costs incurred by the Sequencing Center, to determine the scale of the benefit to the university budget from the closure of the Center. Closure also means that the university does not have to invest in expensive new equipment for the Center, such as upgraded sequencing machines.

How will the speed of sequencing differ in the new system? Turnaround time is one area where a dedicated commercial facility such as GeneWiz

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Natural Selections Editorial Board:
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can excel. GeneWiz will pickup samples once a day at RU. Standard turnaround time provided by GeneWiz is 36 hours, the time between the collection of samples from drop-off location to receiving the sequences. For example, samples dropped off during the day on Monday, will be collected that evening, and their processing will start the following morning. The data will be emailed back on Wednesday morning. This means the effective turnaround as perceived by the user should be the same or faster than that typically provided by the RU Sequencing Center, which had a 48 hr turnaround. GeneWiz also offers a more expensive expedited 24 hr service; samples collected on Monday evening will be processed and data reported back on Tuesday evening. Expedited fast-track sequencing was not available at RU.

Are there any differences in the scientific services provided? The RU Sequencing Center charges the same prices for samples processed with non-standard protocols, such as reactions with dGTP/dTTP mixes and special purpose additives. The RU Sequencing Center also offers PCR cleanups (\$2.00) and plasmid preparation (\$3.00). About 10% of Center users have been taking advantage of these DNA preparation services. They are not listed by GeneWiz as standard services offered, but we were told by a GeneWiz employee that they are available. The RU and GeneWiz were unable to release to us the detailed pricing structure negotiated for the sequencing services. However, according to Annabelle Santos, GeneWiz Account Manager for the New York region, samples requiring special handling (such as a request for non-standard protocols) will incur an additional cost (\$4.00 for regular GeneWiz customers.)

The RU DNA sequencing staff members who are about to lose their jobs, have been performing very well. The DNA sequencing facility provided a widely praised and high quality service that was used by 75% of labs on campus. The most highly used core facility, they carried out 10,000 reactions a month. Although no one was required to use

their services, most labs chose to do their sequencing at RU instead of commercially. The staff, will be applying for internal transfers at Rockefeller. They received one month's notice, and are not guaranteed another job at RU. Plans for the DNA Sequencing Center space have not been announced. The sequencing machines will be converted and used for genotyping in the forthcoming revamped Genotyping Center.

Amy Wilkerson described to the steps that led to the decision: The concept of outsourcing sequencing services has been discussed in the administration for at least two years. Input from many people contributed to the decision making process. A comprehensive review of RU scientific resource centers was commissioned by President Nurse and conducted by John Tooze in spring 2004. The academic advisory committee of the DNA Sequencing Center, chaired by George Cross was also consulted. Outreach was made to the heads of labs that were either big or frequent users of the Center. The actual decision to implement the outsourcing was made by President Nurse. Amy Wilkerson told us that users who have spoken to her have been supportive of the decision without exception.

We contacted several lab heads who have substantial sequencing needs (hundreds of samples per month). Of those who responded to our questions, none was consulted about the impending closure or was aware that this was in the works. A researcher from a lab with high sequencing needs commented: "At the beginning there were problems with the quality of output of the Center. But since about a year, the quality of reads has improved substantially, as well as the turnaround times. We are now very satisfied with the service. I am very surprised that now that the center got its act together it is being closed."

It is prudent that the University spends its resources on unique in-house services and outsources mature technologies to outside providers who can do the same job at the same or better quality, price, and speed. However, to allow all the concerned parties to adapt

and provide input, the process of outsourcing such a vital and widely used service as sequencing could have been done more openly and gradually. Hopefully, the administration made a correct decision that will benefit science at the University. To quote one of the PIs we talked to: "...outsourcing to GeneWiz appears to be a good idea. ...if anything the impact of the closure may be positive for my lab: faster and cheaper service. But the proof will be in the pudding!"

Postdoc Rent

Owing to a number of articles about the postdoc rent subsidy in this issue, *NS* presents a quick primer to provide background.

The postdocs have been receiving a subsidy reducing the cost of their RU housing rent. This subsidy amounted to an annual total of about \$1 million dollars covering all postdocs, which was paid from the general University budget of \$260 million (www.guidestar.org). In July, President Paul Nurse made a proposal to remove the subsidy, increase salary guidelines, and establish a hardship fund for postdocs. This means that the million dollars to pay for the extra rent will now either have to come from a salary increase paid from PIs' own budgets or help from the university directly to PIs, or alternatively via funds given directly to postdocs from the University-funded postdoc hardship fund.

Many people have been upset about rent increases. It is virtually impossible to get an apartment in Manhattan on a postdoc salary. Postdocs are also concerned that the extra strain on PIs' budgets, considering the lag time of a year or more it takes to get a new grant, could result in lay-offs, especially of more expensive senior postdocs.

RU Postdocs: Counting the Cost

By Anna Upton and Allan Coop

This month the Postdoctoral Association (PDA) reports the latest developments in escalating tension between RU's postdoc scientists and the administration. After frustrating negotiations between the PDA and administration, 160 of 394 postdocs left the bench to meet with and challenge surprised RU administration representatives. This group represents a huge turn out – the PDA general meeting this year attracted only 40. The current issue: elimination of the postdoc rent subsidy resulting in an immediate 27.3 % rent increase for postdocs in RU housing (in some cases as much as \$500 per month). The bigger issue: postdocs have lost trust in RU administration and are looking for change.

As detailed in last month's *NS*, the rent increase is due to a new postdoc compensation package – presented as a "significant increase" in a memo sent to postdocs. The package, the result of a comprehensive compensation review conducted by Human Resources (HR), includes the loss of a rent subsidy postdocs currently receive. New pay scales are also introduced, intended to offset the extra rent. However, lab heads decide the extra pay each postdoc gets, within a range set by HR. In the absence of any guarantees, many postdocs expect the minimum, far less than their rent increase and without the annual increment for increased experience, amounting to a net pay cut.

In a meeting with the PDA, HR representatives assured postdocs there would be no net losses. But how would the lab head know what to pay and how would RU administration enforce this? The PDA could not obtain answers and two of the representatives resigned in frustration. Postdocs, close to lease signing dates, panicked and email debate ensued. A group named "no rent hike" appeared offering anonymous representation to postdocs who feared reprisals if they complained to their lab head or to RU. Finally, HR suggested a meeting with the postdoc

community.

At the meeting, many postdocs were visibly distressed by the anticipated personal hardship. But a collective and deeper upset was in evidence too: postdocs told administration representatives they "do not trust the RU administration." HR representatives offered to negotiate for each postdoc in turn to achieve a salary increase based on their needs. The postdocs demanded standard procedures without the need to approach HR as individuals – some asserted their fear to be seen as a complainer, less dedicated to science than those who accepted hardship. Others worried their lab head might dismiss them rather than pay an increased salary. Ultimately, a blanket assurance was made – detailed in the PDA section of this *NS* issue. The PDA and administration continue to work to achieve a resolution.

Goaded by the information vacuum at the meeting, postdocs started to question other issues: "will the childcare subsidy be removed?" "do we have a standard grievance procedure?" were two. If compensation can be changed with little notice, do postdocs have any security at all? In fact, postdocs sign no written employment contract (they receive only an appointment letter stating their salary and length of employment – renewed annually). They also receive the employee handbook and agree to abide by its policies, however, "the University retains the right to alter or eliminate, without prior notice, any employment policy, practice or benefit described." Furthermore, there is no formal grievance procedure for postdocs because they are not staff employees, although HR representatives commented at the meeting that "the grievance procedure is being expanded... to allow for the fact that each case is different."

The new package for postdocs includes 20 days vacation, a huge step forward since previously there were no guidelines. Postdocs are not considered to be employees of RU, hence there is confusion about their rights and formal procedures among the postdoc community. HR assured postdocs that RU is

strongly competitive with institutes around the country, and in this they are correct, our problems are recognized at a national level.

Many postdoc scientists across the USA have a "gray area" status, such as trainee, despite their role as functioning scientists. *Nature Genetics* notes "postdocs occupy a bizarre no man's land between student and faculty." Moreover, "no uniform guidelines exist to spell out what is expected of any of the parties involved: the postdoc, the PI or the institution...this has caused gross discrepancies in the conditions under which postdocs are employed" (*Nature Genetics* 2003, 35, 109-110).

The National Postdoc Association, which formed in 2002, identifies some of the conditions at issue: "generally they do not have well-defined expectations of employment, appropriate employment rights and responsibilities.....consistent employment benefits such as proper health care, pensions, occupational health insurance, or procedures for resolving conflict (www.nationalpostdoc.org).

Scientists are also working longer in postdoc positions before securing an employee status job: "scientists must now work until midlife before they can obtain a stable income and clear benefits" (*Science*, 2002, 298 40-41). In response, postdocs across the USA have started to demand improved conditions, standard procedures, and written guarantees. Some have even unionized, such as postdocs at the University of Connecticut Health Center, who joined a union of other UConn workers in August 2003.

At RU, as at many institutions, much is still taken on trust, including informal but important parts of compensation like the housing subsidy. Trust of the administration and lab head is imperative – aided by clear communication and timely notice of changes. At this meeting, the postdocs stressed that the RU administration is rapidly losing this trust. Postdocs around the country are challenging their national problem one institution at a time – is RU next?

PDA News

Rent Subsidy: Postdocs Speak Out And Unite

By Tirtha Das

The recent PDA general meeting, held on August 19, became a rallying ground for Postdocs opposed to the University's widely unpopular rent subsidy elimination proposal. Virginia Huffman, Maria Lazzaro and Dorian Johnson, while addressing specific concerns raised by the audience, sensed the immense feeling of discontent that has been building among Postdocs ever since the official announcement of the proposal on July 12, 2004.

The Meeting: University answers directly to Postdocs

The proposal is unpopular because the University has never stated clearly how they will ensure Postdocs are not worse off financially as a result of the proposed changes. While many other aspects of the proposal are clearly stated, the lack of written procedures that would guarantee the financial well-being of Postdocs was an issue that was intensely debated at the meeting. This topic became the focal point around which the Postdocs united and led to a vociferous demand for a written guarantee from the University. In response to this overwhelming show of unity, Virginia Huffman, Associate Vice President of Human Resources, agreed to provide a memorandum that

will state the University's guarantee that 'no Postdoc will be worse off'. At the end of the meeting, Postdocs got together and formed 'task forces', each group with a specific assignment. The collective goal of these groups is to ensure that a written guarantee is sent to Postdocs and that the University implements it.

The meeting was called because the University wanted to address the concerns of the Postdocs directly. With precise information about loss of subsidy and new salary in its possession, the University was in a position to answer specific questions the Postdocs had.

"We feel disrespected..." was a comment from the audience, referring to the limited information the University provided the Postdoc community during this entire process. The University knows the exact shortfall (where applicable) individual Postdocs will experience, and the amount of additional salary the PIs or the 'hardship fund' needs to provide. The University's reluctance to provide this information in writing to individual Postdocs and outline mechanisms that will guarantee additional compensation is disconcerting to most. It is an indication, many Postdocs feel, that the University is not committed to making sure Postdocs get compensated in a timely and fair manner.

PDA's role before the meeting

There has been considerable debate about the PDA's role during this process. Postdocs have questioned the effectiveness of the PDA and subjected its actions to intense scrutiny. Some Postdocs have blamed the PDA for being inactive and slow, while the proposal cleared its way through the academic council and academic senate. Others have questioned why the PDA never demanded a written guarantee from the University.

The new PDA adopted a policy of 'no Postdoc should be worse off', ever since they came together as a group in early May. The PDA *did not approve* the proposal when it was first presented in a

meeting with Dr. Paul Nurse on April 28, 2004, nor in subsequent meetings with University officials. The PDA maintained that an approval was feasible *only after evaluation of the actual numbers* and extensive feedback from the Postdoc community. Since then, the PDA has been very active in identifying potential problems with the new proposal. To assess the overall effect on the Postdoc community, the PDA requested the University to provide a comprehensive list of how every Postdoc will be affected by the changes. When the Human Resources (HR) department failed to provide this information, the PDA requested Postdocs to calculate their net take home pay (taking the changes into account) before the general meeting on July 12, 2004. It became clear during that meeting that many Postdocs stood to lose income, unless their salaries were increased considerably or financial support was provided from the hardship fund.

The PDA did indeed request a written guarantee during a meeting with Virginia Huffman on August 4, 2004. At that meeting, the PDA told the University that many Postdocs were concerned about having to request additional salary from their respective mentors. Virginia Huffman and Maria Lazzaro assured the PDA this will not be necessary. Professors will get a written memo from HR *reminding* them of the need to offset the rent subsidy loss. The PDA thought this approach was not enforceable and requested that a written guarantee, stating that 'no Postdoc will be worse off', be provided to all Postdocs instead.

More recently, with the initiative of Valerie Horsley, the PDA was able to conduct a survey of how Postdocs will be affected by these changes. This survey is crucial to gauge the mood and sentiment of the Postdocs and develop a consensus for subsequent actions.

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University's Promise to Postdocs

Minutes of postdoc meeting with RU administration August 2004

1. **Written assurance** that the University will not allow any Postdoc to incur net compensation loss due to elimination of rent subsidy.

2. **A meeting with Paul Nurse** to discuss concerns and reasons for removal of subsidy.

3. **A full case study by Human Resources** explaining all calculations and recommendations for each Postdoc, initially using a mock pay check.

4. **Salary recommendations to PI** two months prior to a Postdoc's re-appointment. Human Resources will send a letter to the PIs, including Postdoc's years of experience, salary range to be paid, and rent compensation. An additional letter will be sent to the PI if subsidy loss occurs prior to re-appointment.

5. **Changes to the appointment letter** issued by Human Resources will include grievance procedures and Postdoc's years of experience.

6. **One month free rent** and a letter clarifying when and how it will be issued.

7. **Letter from Rockefeller Housing** to each Postdoc, documenting what their rent will be following subsidy loss.

8. **Privacy release forms** that allow each Postdoc to give Human Resources permission to discuss specific rent increases with their PIs.

PDA's approach for the future

The coming together of Postdocs and the creation of 'task forces' is a remarkable development within this community. Collective action, clear focus, and common sentiment should help us highlight the rent subsidy issue and arrive at a resolution that satisfies the Postdocs. The creation of 'task forces'/subcommittees to deal with specific issues, and the part-time involvement of committed volunteers is a strategy that should become a model for the future; one that the PDA wants to adopt for all future assignments.

The findings of the subcommittees were presented to President Paul Nurse in a meeting held on September 1, 2004. After carefully evaluating the data from the survey and other analysis done by the Status query subcommittee, President Paul Nurse decided to review the University's cost saving analysis and compare it to our findings. He wants this review to be a bilateral process, whereby members of subcommittees work alongside University officials, review each other's analysis, and work towards a prompt and equitable solution. In light of this development, President Paul Nurse has decided to defer the Rent Subsidy Elimination until October 1, 2004.

Blame Canada!

By Chris Gafuik

"Canada, the summit of the Americas your sides lapped by the two great oceans your brow thrust into the Arctic ice your humble name is that of a giant."

[Translation]-**Berthe de Trémaudan**, a Canadian writer of Belgian origin

Canada is a relatively young country by world standards. During its 133 years of existence since confederation, Canada has successfully developed into and remained an example of a relatively peaceful and prosperous multiculturalism.

Canada occupies the northern third of North America, spanning 5,500 kilometers and six time zones from east to west. In land area, with its 10 million square kilometers, it is the second largest country in the world. So large in fact that it is estimated that one meteorite of at least 100 grams strikes Canadian territory every day. Canada could contain 18 countries the size of France or 40 United Kingdoms. A vast and diverse nation, Canada is a territory that embraces great fertile prairies, immense lakes surrounded by boreal forests, rugged mountain ranges, and expanses of wind-swept tundra.

As one might expect, Canada is indeed a cold country (Table 1.) During the winter, no place within its boundaries escapes the bite of frost and temperatures frequently fall below -22 °F (-30°C). Only a small region in Southern Alberta enjoys a few episodes of respite

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Natural Selections
Open Meeting
Tuesday, Sept. 21
6 pm, Faculty Club

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Table 1. Canada - cold enough for you?

	Average annual temperature °F (°C)		Average January temperature °F (°C)	
	High	Low	High	Low
Canadian cities				
Halifax	51 (11)	34 (1)	29 (-2)	13 (-11)
Québec City	48 (9)	30 (-1)	18 (-8)	1 (-17)
Montréal	51(11)	34 (1)	22 (-6)	6 (-15)
Ottawa	51 (11)	33 (1)	21 (-1)	5 (-16)
Toronto	54 (13)	41 (5)	30 (-1)	18 (-8)
Winnipeg	46 (8)	26 (-3)	9 (-11)	-10 (-24)
Vancouver	56 (14)	43 (6)	42 (7)	32 (0)
Yellowknife	31(-1)	15 (-10)	-10 (-24)	-25 (-32)
International comparisons				
Beijing	62 (17)	44 (7)	34 (1)	18 (-8)
London	57 (14)	44 (7)	44 (7)	36 (2)
Los Angeles	69 (21)	55 (13)	64 (18)	46 (8)
Moscow	46 (8)	34 (1)	20 (-7)	9 (-13)
Paris	57 (14)	44 (7)	43 (6)	34 (1)
Tokyo	66 (19)	53 (12)	48 (9)	36 (2)
Washington D.C.	66 (19)	48 (9)	43 (6)	27 (-3)

during the winter, thanks to a warm, dry wind from the Pacific called the Chinook. A Chinook can cause a temperature jump of 45°F (25°C) in an hour! The summers, on the other hand, can be scorching reaching temperatures well above 86°F (30°C). The result is a very wide range of seasonal climates and a requirement for Canadians to maintain a large wardrobe.

Most of Canada's population of 31.4 million lives within 200 kilometers of the United States. In fact, the inhabitants of our three largest cities, Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver, can drive to the border in less than two hours.

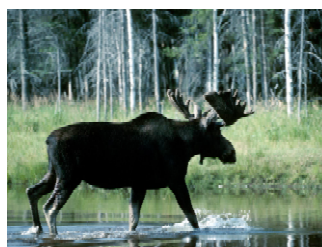
Like the US, Canada is ethnically very diverse and relies heavily on immigration to sustain population growth. A full 18% of all Canadians were foreign born and, in 2002, Canada's population growth increase from immigration was almost twice as much as from natural growth. Canada's largest city, Toronto, with a population of 5 million, has the highest proportion of immigrants of any Canadian metropolitan area at 44%.

Ecumenically, a total of 43% of Canadians report an affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church, while Protestant denominations make up 29% of the population. The largest

gains in religious affiliations occurred among those who identified themselves as Muslim, who more than doubled in number from 250,000 in 1991 to 580,000 in 2001, representing 2% of the total population. The number of people who identify themselves as Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Jewish each represent around 1% of the total population (300,000 people). Interestingly, 16% of Canadians report that they have no connections with an organized religion.

Canada has been recognized internationally for its efforts to promote health, and Canadians largely think of themselves as healthy people. Compared with people in most other countries (including the US), we live longer and suffer from fewer chronic illnesses and disabilities as we age. Despite recent stresses on our health care system, Canadians in general continue to enjoy universal access to insured medical health services. The Healthcare Act states that every Canadian is assured of comprehensive and universal medical services. The main drawback of this Canadian system of healthcare is that specialized services are generally less available than in the US and wait times for such things as elective surgeries and diagnostic procedures are considerably longer.

Canada-US relations are generally very amicable. This is none too surprising considering our degree of cultural similarity and the extent of our economic interdependence. Canada and the US share the world's largest unprotected border, a border that sees 37,000 trucks transporting goods across it every day. In 2003, two-way trade in goods and services surpassed \$441.5 billion, making the US-Canada trading relationship the largest in the world.



As many people are probably aware as a consequence of the blackout last year (an event for which Canada was blamed), Canada supplies close to 100% of the United States' electricity imports, and is the major provider of electricity to the Northeastern US, including New England and New York, as well as the Upper Midwest, the Pacific Northwest, and California.

Despite this close relationship with the US, it is a challenge for Canada to live beside a huge power and our two great nations do not always see eye to eye. The war in Iraq is the most recent example of sometimes disparate American and Canadian ideals. Canada's decision not to support the US in Iraq has decidedly chilled Canada-US relations. Coping with the fact of the USA is, and always has been, an essential ingredient of being Canadian. Throughout much of its short history, a considerable amount of the Canadian identity has been formed as a result of resistance to American Manifest Destiny. Indeed, the Canadian Pacific Railway was built not only to open up and settle the West, but also to establish an East-West link as a foil to perceived American imperial ambitions toward Western Canada. By the same token, "America needs Canada to be not submissive, but stubborn, opinionated, tiresome and of course, always a wise friend."² I think an American friend of mine nicely captured the sentiment of Canada-US relations: "I was pretty hurt when Canada didn't have our backs on Iraq. But you know, best friends don't always have to agree on everything."

References:

1. Statistics from www.statcan.ca
2. John Holmes. (1981) *Life with Uncle: The Canadian-American Relationship*



New York State of Mind

How long have you been living in New York City? I've been living in New York for 13 years.

Where do you live? I live in Faculty House, at York Avenue and 63rd Street.

Which is your favorite neighborhood? Upper East Side. From one side, it is a very upscale residential area, from another, having The Rockefeller University campus as a center of everyday life creates an almost village-like atmosphere, so it's a nice combination.

What do you think is the most overrated thing in the city? And underrated? It's all relative. Many of the things which I thought were overrated don't seem so after some time. Take, for example, Times Square - the quintessential "New York place" according to tourists. It seemed like definitely overrated to me, but I look at it after not being there for a while, and it's a very special place. The same goes for the "underrated", once the buzz is out it becomes overrated. Maybe in a year or two I will



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have a different opinion, but for now, Roosevelt Island is underrated.

What do you miss most when you are out of town? The fast pace of the city and also the spirit and tolerance of people.

If you could change one thing about NYC, what would that be? The public schools. The city kids deserve better.

Describe a perfect weekend in NYC.

On Saturday morning, we would go for a walk with our daughters, maybe to The Metropolitan Museum or the Guggenheim. After that, a nice stroll in Central Park would probably end up in Zabar's food store, then down Broadway to take a cross-town bus back home. In the late evening, my husband and I would go to the West

Village. On Sunday, I'd go for a swim to Asphalt Green, then either for a picnic with the family in The Rockefeller University campus or just spend a couple of quiet hours reading. In the evening, we would go out to meet some friends.

What is the most memorable experience you have had in NYC? My first day in New York: we walked from home by 64th Street to buy some food, it was cold and dark, asphalt was glistening under the street lights, and somewhere between 1st and 2nd avenues I had the feeling that I'd lived all my life in this city.

If you could live anywhere else, where would that be? The only city where I could imagine moving to voluntarily would be Paris.

Do you think of yourself as a New Yorker? Why? Definitely, yes. I've been living in New York most of my adult life, my children were born here, and I simply love this city.

Crick and the World

By Francisco López de Saro

Francis Crick, who died July 28 at age 88, used to wonder why most people, even in developed countries, are generally ignorant of the great scientific achievements of the 20th century, and even more of their implications. Referring to modern genetics, he complained that "a surprising number of highly educated people are indifferent to these discoveries, and in Western society a rather vocal minority is actively hostile to evolutionary ideas". Indeed, as a biologist, I often wonder how people can live in this age unaware of what DNA looks like, or what a cell is, or the fact that our brain is a vast assembly of cells. Since Biology has more implications for what we are or for guiding our ethical decisions than any other science, one would imagine that it should have a strong appeal for everyone. On a practical level,

doesn't knowing about the complexities of our own brain make us more understanding and tolerant of our neighbor's malfunctioning one?

It is often said that scientists should do more to explain their discoveries to the general public (Crick wrote half a dozen books for the nonspecialist). As practicing biologists, however, we tend to underestimate the amount of time and effort that we have spent studying our subject before we could appreciate its wider implications. Simplistic descriptions of DNA as a 'ladder with letters', for example, fail to reach this level, causing people to lose their interest or, even worse, decide that we are just preaching some speculative and unsubstantiated 'theory'. The same happens to me when I read about string theory or quantum mechanics, subjects on which I am quite ignorant. The potential implications of, say, 'multiple parallel universes' leave me, at least for now,

indifferent, no matter how much my physicist friends try to make them exciting.

Another more pessimistic view of Crick's problem, however, could be that the general public is simply more comfortable emotionally with the old, pre-20th century beliefs than with the cold objective facts produced by today's science. For example, many would find nothing glamorous or reassuring in the realization that our genome is 98% identical to that of chimpanzees.

Or maybe it is only a matter of time. Perhaps Crick was just as impatient with the world to know the truth as he was, reputedly, with his colleagues to discuss his latest data and theories.

Natural Selections now has a website.

<http://selections.rockefeller.edu>

Postdoc Rent: Student Perspective

By Ian Berke

It has been a tumultuous month for postdocs at Rockefeller, with major changes planned for their benefits, salaries, and most controversial — their housing rent. With approximately one out of five students either in postdoc housing or on the waiting list, postdoc research part of the likely academic future of many students, and the critical role postdocs play in students' training, it is worthwhile to consider how students may be affected. As discussed here, these changes will make it significantly harder for students to afford alternative housing, may impact student training, and steer more graduating students away from postdoctoral positions.

Ten students (out of 193) currently live in postdoc housing, receiving the same rent subsidy scheduled to end for postdocs. The administration has recently decided that these students will retain the subsidy "until the end of their tenancies in their current apartment." If they transfer to another apartment, they will then pay the base rent without subsidy. All apartments will be subject to a 3-4% yearly increase in rent upon renewal based on "inflationary costs."

For the 26 students currently on the waiting list for postdoc housing, they will NOT receive a rent subsidy, nor will any future students. In speaking to students about these changes, some are frustrated that after having waited a good portion of the 12-18 month waiting period for postdoc housing, they can no longer afford it. Student stipends are currently \$24,500 for the year. Although the general reason for those wishing postdoc housing was an apartment large enough for a couple or family, in some cases the extra income provided by a partner is no longer enough to cover the rent increase.

There are currently 56 one-bedroom apartments in student housing and no vacancies until someone leaves. Since apartments are assigned during a lottery process with senior students given



Professor Flipman and farmer Dave present their discovery of the gene that causes crop circles

By Sean Taverna

priority, this can mean a waiting period of several years before you can move into a luxurious one-bedroom pad. Some students have expressed frustration over the lack of suitable housing for married couples or domestic partnerships. A couple in a tiny Sophie Fricke studio can get pretty claustrophobic, while a couple sharing a two-bedroom with another student can lead to uncomfortable circumstances. In my first year at Rockefeller, married students and partnerships faced broken promises for one-bedroom apartments and postdoc housing was offered as a viable alternative. Unless you have a partner that makes significantly more than you, affording postdoc housing is now very difficult. Another alternative is to find off-campus housing. Those electing to live off campus can have their Metrocard and high-speed internet access reimbursed by the Dean's office. Speaking from experience, however, the travel-times from the outer boroughs (where affordable housing might be found) can make it very difficult to conduct your work.

The changes in the postdoc compensation package may have other, more indirect effects on students. With the changes in pay scale, PIs will have to spend a larger portion of their budgets on postdoc salaries. This financial burden may result in less money for research or fewer postdocs in the future. Since postdocs are generally the day-to-day mentors of grad students, having fewer available to seek their expertise could influence

our training, although Dean Strickland does not believe "it will have a major impact on student training."

Approximately 20% of students do a postdoc at Rockefeller after graduating (although some are very short), highlighting the relevance to students of these changes. In an informal survey of the student body by email, students expressed support for postdocs, with some wishing to further help in their fight with the administration. Although some wrote the administration has the right to remove the subsidy, the speed of its elimination was wrong since postdocs had been promised a subsidy when they had joined.

With ~75% of RU graduates continuing in academics, becoming a postdoc lies in the future for many students. It is very troubling for students to be surrounded by unhappy postdocs who complain of being in a demoralizing situation that they have no control over. Students don't choose to become postdocs to become rich—we become postdocs because we love science. Yet, a postdoc position may be losing its appeal if we want to be fairly treated and work in an atmosphere where the first concern is science, not money. Will fewer students chose the path of the postdoc? Time will tell.



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