

NEWS

Networking in VIVO

Friends follow each other on Facebook. Colleagues swap contact details on LinkedIn. And soon, academic scientists eager to forge cross-disciplinary collaborations will have their own network: VIVO.

Funded by a US\$12.2-million grant from the US National Center for Research Resources, VIVO aims to allow researchers to transcend disciplines and tap into the collective resources needed to facilitate breakthrough discoveries. The site was first created at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, in 2003, but for use only at the university (vivo.cornell.edu). The money, allocated through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, will be used to expand it across universities and to improve its cross-disciplinary search capabilities.

Its creators say that VIVO will help to create the collaborations that are increasingly crucial in science. Michael Conlon, lead investigator on the grant and interim director of biomedical informatics at the University of Florida in Gainesville, argues that web searches generally require too much sifting through results to find the specific researcher capabilities desired for a given project. A VIVO search allows researchers to quickly search for faculty members who have a specific expertise or skill set — for example, a genomics specialist looking to team up with a bioinformatics specialist and a clinician.

Unlike Facebook or LinkedIn, VIVO-

assembled web pages will be filled with information from official, verifiable sources. For example, academic institutions will provide information about researchers' positions, and

publication lists will be pulled directly from scientific journals. This should produce results with much greater specificity than, say, using Google to mine web pages, says Conlon. The site's algorithm searches for scientific topics, and VIVO yields detailed 'hits' broken down into the most relevant subcategories — such as

researchers, activities, events, organizations, publications or subtopics related to the term. "If you search for people, you'll just get people," says Conlon.

Researchers will be able to individualize their sites with detailed information about interests and research opportunities. VIVO membership criteria are still being discussed, and the requirements may differ between participating institutions, but all academics and graduate students should be eligible.

Conlon says that by next year, VIVO will connect seven universities in California, Florida, Indiana, Missouri, New York and Puerto Rico. He hopes for many more by the end of the two-year grant, including non-US schools.

Although Conlon cringes at the notion that VIVO will become a frivolous 'Facebook for scientists', he admits that they will use Facebook to spread the word. ■

Virginia Gewin



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POSTDOC JOURNAL

The career less travelled



In Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, a traveller reaches a fork in a wooded path, and chooses the less-worn trail. Walking along, he imagines a future in which he will say: "I took the one less travelled by/ And that has made all the difference." The poem seems to say that independence leads to happiness.

Yet on closer reading, this interpretation seems unlikely. Far from one path being less travelled, both are worn "about the same" after the traveller's passing. The path becomes less travelled only in the traveller's imagination, as

he dreams of a moment "ages and ages hence", implying that independent thought leads to happiness. To me, the poem suggests that we often ascribe meaning and purpose to arbitrary decisions.

At a conference recently, I heard a graduate student ask a professor to describe the choices that led to his career success. I smiled when the professor replied that many of his key decisions were determined by chance. The student seemed surprised, but to me it made sense. Unlike Frost's traveller, the professor was honest about

the role of chance in his life.

As I begin a new year of faculty applications, I must write a research plan. In this short essay, I have to describe the course of my past research as well as of future work. Reflecting on past decisions relating to my research direction, I find myself in the position of Frost's traveller, trying to ascribe meaning and purpose to the machinations of fate. My career path owes an awful lot to chance. ■

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IN BRIEF

Academic benefits

Three universities and a government research organization are in the top 10 of the 'best US employers' list for workers aged older than 50, as compiled by the AARP, formerly the American Association of Retired Persons. Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, came first, the US National Institutes of Health third, Massachusetts Institute of Technology seventh and George Mason University of Fairfax, Virginia, tenth. GlaxoSmithKline at Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, debuted this year at 25. The annual survey, launched in 2001, cited retirement benefits such as health and life insurance, job training and placement for older workers. The list is at go.nature.com/h42oIj.

Topping out

The retention of US science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) students is strong except among the best performers, says a study that followed student cohorts from high-school graduation as early as 1970s through to mid-career as late as 2005. The report, called *Steady as She Goes?*, debunks the notion that the United States is not producing enough STEM college graduates, say its authors. But it suggests that many high performers left in early to mid-career in the late 1990s. The authors, Hal Salzman of Rutgers University in New Jersey and Lindsay Lowell of Georgetown University in Washington DC, speculate that they may have opted for non-traditional science careers or higher-paying jobs.

Changes planned for ERC

An independent review of the nascent European Research Council (ERC) — launched in February 2007 — has prompted the European Commission to change the council's management and regulatory structure. Its executive agency had been led by a secretary-general, but it is now seeking a scientist with leadership experience for the top post to combine scientific and administrative functions, according to the commission. The council will also seek input from the European Parliament and the European Council of Ministers on establishing regulations for funding research. The council's funding budget, provided by the commission, was set up under a European Union programme providing €7.5 billion (US\$11 billion) for the period 2007–13.