

GRADUATE JOURNAL

Wrapping things up

After emerging from my penultimate thesis committee meeting, I experienced a range of bittersweet emotions underscored by a profound sense of nostalgia. Although I am thrilled about finishing my PhD and moving on to a postdoc at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, I will be sad to leave New York and Rockefeller University.

What I will miss most is what makes any institution special — the people. From the security guards to the full professors, there have been many who have nurtured me through graduate school. My lab mates at the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center and my adviser, Mark Muesing, have been like a surrogate family to me. Our relationship has been based on mutual exchange. Mark taught me the nuances of HIV biology, I taught him the finer points of rap music and hip-hop culture.

So as I wrap things up, I'll remember everyone who made my graduate experience so unforgettable. I'll take all of the knowledge and encouragement with me into my future professional experiences, and I aspire to attain a level of scientific achievement that will make them proud. In the meantime, I want them all to know that if they should crave some fine French cuisine or just some friendly conversation, I'm only a phone call or trans-Atlantic flight away. ■

Tshaka Cunningham is a fifth-year graduate student at Rockefeller University in New York.

Rules of engagement

Since the arrival of Gregory Lucier as chief executive last year, Invitrogen has been subtly broadening its role. Headquartered in Carlsbad, California, the research-tools company is seeking to build research partnerships with academic, industrial and government customers, and is focusing on the way life sciences converge with healthcare.

One significant change that Invitrogen has made is to increase its scientific recruitment. In particular, it is seeking out promising young researchers. Last year, it spent 6% of its revenue on research and development (R&D); this year it plans to spend 10% (some US\$900 million), and as a result will hire up to 250 PhD scientists over the next 12 months.

Perhaps the most aggressive tool in this recruiting drive is the company's experimental

project called the Life Science Leadership Program, which it launched in January. Under this, the firm scoured the best universities worldwide and drew up a shortlist of 15 of the brightest and best PhDs and MBA candidates. The aim was to give three of these a job.

To smooth the recruitment process, each of the candidates spent two days at the company. There they got a feel for what Invitrogen does and how it does it. More importantly, they got a chance to see the breadth of opportunities that were potentially available to them — both the range of scientific projects and the resources that back them up.

In short, the initiative tries to show how attractive Invitrogen is as a job prospect for them. They can, for example, pursue a technical career path or choose to follow a managerial route.

Ultimately, the goal is to have four 'waves' of this two-year scientific leadership programme up and running, with 20–30 people per wave. Every 6–9 months, the new recruits will be given a new assignment in a different part of the company. And after two years, they should be qualified for a fairly meaty job.

For example, Invitrogen is building an R&D centre in Frederick, Maryland, which will eventually house 150 scientists. If members of the leadership programme choose a scientific track, they could well become leaders at that facility. If they choose a management role, they could be leading teams in five years.

The key to the concept is that the programme is not a postdoc, but rather it is a 'pipeline' for middle- to senior-level scientists. ■

Joe Rodriguez, senior vice-president, human resources, Invitrogen, Carlsbad, California.

MOVERS

Eve Slater, board of directors, Vertex Pharmaceuticals, Cambridge, Massachusetts



Eve Slater's career, which includes high points in academia, industry and government, embodies the improvements that have occurred for female scientists over the past 30 years. "When you roll back the film you can see there has been progress," says Slater.

Even so, her progress was mixed with the kinds of choices that female scientists must still make today. She chose to leave the clinical practice,

research and teaching she loved in Boston — she was chief resident at Massachusetts General Hospital — because her spouse had career opportunities in New York.

Instead, she joined the drug company Merck. She began her industrial career as a basic scientist, but soon found that her ability to communicate with scientists from other specialities helped to open doors. A pivotal moment came when she made a presentation on the cholesterol drug lovastatin to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for approval. After this was successful, Merck gave her a position in regulatory affairs.

Slater loved her new role, describing it as a "truly creative discipline". She enjoyed recruiting the physicians and scientists needed to answer key questions about how drugs worked in humans, and she savoured the scepticism she knew she would face at the FDA.

Her success was such that she was

considered for the post of FDA commissioner a few times. But in 2001, some influential members of Congress signed a letter saying that the FDA commissioner should never have worked for industry, which prohibited her from getting the job.

Instead, she joined the US Department of Health and Human Services as health secretary Tommy Thompson's assistant. She enjoyed the public speaking and the chance to be an advocate on many issues — especially women's health — but eventually she felt the urge to return to the private sector.

So she now fills her schedule with positions that match her interests and abilities, such as serving on boards of favourite causes and, most recently, joining Vertex as a board member. She does, however, believe that she has time and energy for "one more big job". Her creativity, adaptability and persistence are more than likely to lead her to one. ■

CV 2001–03: Assistant secretary for health, US Department of Health and Human Services

1983–2002: Adjunct associate clinical professor of medicine, Columbia University, New York

1983–2001: Merck Sharp & Dohme Research Laboratories, positions included senior vice-president of external policy, vice-president of corporate public affairs

1977–82: Chief of hypertension unit, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, and assistant professor of medicine, Harvard Medical School