

NEWS

Sponsor a scientist, online

In these lean times, research institutions need to be creative in the quest for extra funding. The latest brainstorm is online bidding to encourage donor support for graduate research fellowships.

'Sponsor-a-Scientist' is an item on eBay, the online auction site, as of 4 September. The Sbarro Health Research Organization (SHRO), a non-profit collective based at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and the University of Siena in Italy, hopes it will yield at least one fellowship, to last a year, for graduate training. A best-case scenario would be five fellowships.

Bids start at US\$25,000. The winner will be entitled to name the fellowship (in their name or to honour someone else), meet the sponsored researcher and tour the lab. Raffaella Cimina, director of development at the SHRO, which specializes in research into cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular disease, conceived the idea. At the time *Nature* went to press, there were no bids, but Cimina says they plan to renew the bid every ten days in the hope that word will spread and bids will materialize before the auction's target end date, tentatively planned for early 2010.

Some 120 graduate students and first-year postdocs are being trained at the SHRO to investigate the genetics of lung, breast and prostate cancer, hepatitis and cardiovascular disease, as well as stem-cell research and developmental biology. But despite success in securing grants from the US National Institutes of Health and state and private donors, raising the money needed to train graduates and postdocs

is difficult. "Given the tightness of money for training new scientists and the pervasiveness of online portals and social networking, using the



Internet to jumpstart a scientific career seemed a natural next step," says SHRO president and chief executive Antonio Giordano. He says that SHRO wants to take advantage of sites such as eBay to reach new donors and engage the public in biomedical research. He also hopes to build connections between donors

and researchers.

Steven Perrin, president of the non-profit ALS Technology Development Institute (ALS TDI) in Boston, Massachusetts, suggests that the SHRO's eBay approach could, if carefully implemented, ensure the long-term support needed for several years of student training. Giordano guarantees that the recipient of any fellowship will be covered for their entire training period by matching funds from existing donations.

"We all need to be creative to keep non-profits productive and moving forward," says Perrin, whose organization focuses on amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a progressive neurodegenerative disease. The ALS TDI has already used social-networking sites, such as Facebook, to help connect those interested in research fund-raising for a particular disease.

If the eBay approach works, Giordano says the SHRO will expand the idea — and he expects that other institutions will follow its lead. ■

Virginia Gewin

Sponsor-A-Scientist is at
<http://tinyurl.com/n5l2q2>

IMAGE.COM/CORBIS

IN BRIEF

Biotech goes to school

A bill passed by the California state legislature should make it easier for the California biotech industry to recruit technical staff from within the state. The bill, which still needs the governor's signature, requires the state education department to incorporate stem-cell and biotech curricula into the public schools, with help from industry and the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine (CIRM), the state's stem-cell agency. A state biotech trade association warned in a 2008 report of a scarcity of trained lab professionals. "The pipeline starts in high school, and having the curriculum at this level is really important," says CIRM spokesman Don Gibbons.

Teaching sequestration

A new training programme for prospective workers in the carbon capture and storage industry will target geoscientists and engineers currently working in the oil industry as well as academic scientists. Under development by the Alliance for Sequestration Training, Outreach, Research and Education at the University of Texas, Austin, the programme has a three-year US\$994,702 grant from the US Department of Energy and will become self-sustaining after the grant expires, according to project director Hilary Olson. Topics covered will include resource assessment, site characterization, reservoir engineering, geochemical and geomechanical impact and risk assessment.

International health

The number of students enrolled in global health programmes at universities across the United States and Canada has doubled since 2006, thanks to growing interest in careers addressing health disparities and disease prevention in developing countries.

These survey findings were released on 14 September by the Consortium of Universities for Global Health, an alliance of North American universities formed to organize health projects between universities and developing nations. The survey found that numbers had increased at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level — graduate students increased from 949 in 2006 to 2,010 this year, undergraduates from 1,286 to 2,687.

Lab trips foster collegiality



Every summer the members of our lab spend a weekend at a state park, and our most recent annual outing was to Niagara Falls, where we camped, hiked and enjoyed the scenery. I was captivated by the thunderous roar and sprays of mist emanating from the falls. I always look forward to the lab outing because it is guaranteed to be fun — as it was this summer.

But these outings are more than just fun excursions. They also build collegiality among our lab members. This is important because cooperation and effective

communication can help the lab to run more smoothly and more efficiently. During summer outings, lab members work together to set up tents, build a campfire and cook meals. We exchange confidences during long hikes. The value in building these interactions is reflected in the operations of the lab, as co-workers must similarly depend on each other for reagents, interpreting results and troubleshooting.

In a different lab, I once watched two graduate students troubleshooting related molecular-biology

protocols. One eventually discovered that a labile buffer had gone bad. However, he selfishly opted to keep the knowledge to himself, leaving his fellow student to flounder for weeks. A lack of collegiality can have a serious impact on lab members. Consequently, in the near future when I look for another job, collegiality is a factor I will consider. I have witnessed at first hand its value in the workplace. ■

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