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California, home of laureates

How do you recruit Nobel laureates to your region? It helps to have a concentration of them already in place. But other factors, such as climate, culture and commitment to excellence play a role. California, which excels at both producing laureates and attracting them from other parts of the world, will this month join in the celebrations of the award's centenary.

The state has an enviable association with the Nobel prize. It has the highest concentration of laureates in the world — nearly 25% of laureates in the past 10 years claim a California connection.

One of them, David Baltimore, president of the California Institute of Technology, has some theories on why the state has been both a magnet and an incubator for laureates. Baltimore, who shared the 1975 prize in physiology or medicine for his contributions to showing how viral reverse transcriptase can lead to cancer, says that a concentration of excellent public and private research universities has helped.

But attitude — more than location and climate — has made those universities conducive to the kind of science that eventually gets rewarded. California's universities, born early in the last century, are "unfettered by historical commitments and hierarchical formality", Baltimore says.

Other regions throughout the world are working on the easy part: assembling a critical mass of universities, government labs and research-based businesses within close proximity. The less tangible necessity — not only creating an environment that fosters an attitude of innovation, but keeping that spirit as the place becomes established — is much more difficult. Having laureates on staff does help to attract money and talent, Baltimore says. But, he warns: "Resting on your laurels is a poor idea."

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor

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