

alignment programs to molecular graphics software. The principal or sole authors of 18 of them are computer-savvy biologists. Although this is an inconclusive experiment in statistical terms, the message is clear. Biologists with strong computer skills are certainly out there somewhere. So funding bodies should finance interdisciplinary research in bioinformatics, but must not forget the 'jacks of all trades' who have already made such a useful contribution.

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Pasadena pranks

Sir— I take exception to your unflattering characterization of the California Institute of Technology on the occasion of its being ranked the top US university by *US News & World Report* (Opinion, *Nature* **400**, 801; 1999). This ranking is not a fluke, even if caused by an arbitrary change in the criteria — the previous criteria were equally subjective.

The ranking signifies that Caltech, even though it is very small, has been, and will be, a power to reckon with. We have remained small by choice (only some 290 professors and 900 undergraduates) and do not aspire to the breadth of a larger university. But we do what we do extremely well, and manage to have a rich cultural life (and fun) while doing it.

That the magazine "had to delve back 15 years for an example of interesting non-curricular activity" is a failing of its research, not of the institute. A third of our students participate in intercollegiate sports, and student enterprises abound in music, theatre and the arts. Beyond such regular scientific visitors as Stephen Hawking, our campus has hosted recent visits by Tom Stoppard, Seamus Heaney, Walter Cronkite, Oliver Stone, Jonathan Miller, Beverly Sills and Warren Buffett.

The spectacular pranks that are part of our lore (such as changing the Hollywood sign to read "Caltech", or the Rose Bowl game prank you mentioned) stem not from football envy, but from the imagination and exuberance of our students, who request the 12 a.m.–2 a.m. recitation you mention to better manage their busy lives.

We are, as you note, listed as a poor "party school" because our students find fun in their own ways. And no one danced in the streets because we were too busy doing what we do best.

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Hospital merger leaves clinical science intact

Sir— The News article by Rex Dalton about the merger between the hospitals of Stanford and the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) is misleading (*Nature* **400**, 300; 1999).

First, it gives the impression that "faculty leaders" have abruptly changed course and are now calling for dissolution of the merger. Dalton quotes Warren Gold, who has opposed the merger from its outset. But many of our departmental chairs and other leaders of the faculty remain more open-minded about the fate of the merger. In particular, they recognize the substantial disadvantages now posed by dissolution, whatever their original views on the merger.

Second, Dalton appears to blame the merger for the pressures that increasingly impede clinicians from doing scholarly work. This is inaccurate. The pressures arise from the punishing realities of the medical marketplace. They existed before the formation of the merger, and they can be found at academic health centres throughout the United States.

Third, Dalton's article concludes with an undocumented assertion that basic scientists at UCSF are challenging the need for "clinical programmes". But no sensible basic scientist could imagine a medical school or health-science campus without clinical programmes.

I have been a member of the basic science faculty at UCSF for 30 years and know that it recognizes the importance of physician–scientists and clinical research. Indeed, the collegiality between basic scientists and clinicians at UCSF is exceptional.

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Sir— In the article entitled "Merger of top Californian medical schools turns sour", Dalton's suggestions that "the crisis is pitting physicians against basic science researchers" and that "Some basic scientists have even argued that clinical programmes aren't needed" are pure fantasy, as is the headline referring to the fictitious merger of the schools.

Merger of the schools has never been discussed, only merger of the hospitals, and we have not heard any of our basic science colleagues advocate the ludicrous notion of our medical school abandoning its clinical programmes.

Indeed, we basic scientists have been brought together with our clinical

colleagues in coping with the national crisis in funding for health care by institutions such as UCSF that are dedicated to the care of all patients, rich and poor, as well as to the creation of knowledge. Our current planning for the future of disease-related research reflects this fusion of interests and experience.

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Freedom to speak or to misinform?

Sir— There is no doubt that freedom of speech as well as freedom of science are values that need to be protected. But the News article about a dispute over freedom of speech at the Institute of Molecular Biotechnology (IMB) at Jena, Germany, seems to give credence to a small group of people whose main aim seems to be to discredit the institute (*Nature* **401**, 201; 1999).

The goal in the present case was not to limit Günter Löber's rights, but to prevent further dissemination of false allegations about his former place of work. It is important to ensure that the many current IMB employees retain the freedom to conduct their research. Löber was not prohibited from criticizing the IMB, but he has agreed not to repeat groundless statements harmful to the institute publicly.

The News article contains other errors. After Manfred Eigen's departure from IMB's supervisory board, for example, the other members did not resign "in sympathy". The only other member who left then had resigned six months previously because of his workload.

Eigen has never been chairman of the supervisory or scientific advisory board of the IMB.

The statement attributed to Eigen — that he was told by the research ministry of the state of Thüringen only to speak to IMB employees in the presence of a ministry representative — is also incorrect. The truth is that the chairman of the supervisory board had expressed his desire to be present at one discussion in June 1996.

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