

MOVERS

Suzanne Fortier, president, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada



2000–05: Vice-principal (academic), Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

1995–2000: Vice-principal (research), Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

1982–2005: Professor of chemistry and computing, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Suzanne Fortier's career is built on interactions. As a crystallographer, she found beauty within the inner structures of protein crystals. Now, as leader of Canada's top government funding agency for the sciences, she aims to foster interactions among government, researchers and the public.

Growing up in Quebec at a time when children were educated in religious schools, Fortier's first exposure to science came from a nun who taught chemistry. The nun's infectious enthusiasm spurred Fortier to study science at McGill University in Montreal.

After earning her PhD at McGill, Fortier took a postdoc at the Medical Foundation of Buffalo (now the Hauptman-Woodward Medical Research Institute) in a world-class crystallography lab. She worked under Herbert Hauptman, who pioneered mathematical methods to analyse crystallographic diffraction data. In 1985, he won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. "He was a fantastic mentor, very supportive and an inspiring person," says Fortier.

In 1982, Fortier was the first woman to be hired by the department of chemistry at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. She was later cross-appointed to the department of computing when she recognized a role for artificial intelligence in determining the structure of matter.

Early in her career at Queen's, Fortier joined the Ontario Council on University Affairs, a now defunct university advisory group to the Ontario government. "I was surprised by the richness of the interactions," she says. "I had had no interest in administration, but I learned how exciting teamwork and policy-making were."

That experience encouraged her to make the jump from research to administration at Queen's in the mid-1990s, where she became vice-principal (research) and later vice-principal (academic). She missed research and teaching, but found that contributing to the institution as a whole provided a sense of accomplishment. "As administrators, we are there to serve our community," she says. "The success of others is what has to motivate you."

After 11 years as vice-principal, Fortier moved to Ottawa in January to head the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council. Her aim is to encourage the success of researchers while also enhancing communication between them and the Canadian public. "It's a goal of all our universities to be players on the world stage," she says, "so how can we all work together to achieve that?"

Hannah Hoag

SCIENTISTS & SOCIETIES

Actors as teachers

Scientists often have exceptional technical skills but may have received little training in communication and management. To address this gap, a new training programme called LabAct was introduced last year by the Laboratory Management Institute (LMI) at the University of California, Davis. It uses professional actors to help young scientists rehearse behaviour that can be effective in dealing with difficult communication, management and ethical situations they may face in their laboratories. We believe that this training will enhance overall productivity, quality and job satisfaction.

The actors receive specialized training in techniques for drawing out and engaging participants and helping them gain confidence. They use their expertise to help participants identify real workplace issues and practise new behaviours to resolve them.

Last year, 22 scientists, mainly postdocs, attended a two-day LMI training session where speakers gave talks on topics such as leadership, ethics and project management. LabAct was one part of the workshop. Participants anonymously submitted issues they wanted to see enacted, such as conflicts over authorship, access to shared research equipment, and work habits. The actors improvised scenes that illustrated the issues, often

in an egregious or humorous manner. After a group discussion, the actors re-enacted the scene incorporating participant-recommended behaviour. This allowed the participants to experiment with different behaviours, through the actors, until they found those that resonated best with them. As participants felt more comfortable, some joined the actors to participate in the scene, gaining practice in effective and authentic communication.

What distinguishes LabAct training from online instruction or discussion of case studies is that LabAct gives participants hands-on practice in developing new communication and problem-solving skills in a safe environment before implementing them in the workplace.

Originally conceived for postdoctoral scholars and new investigators, LabAct training can be used for many topics and audiences. We are now developing LabAct training to attract young students and members of under-represented groups to careers in science, and have also been approached by industry and government to provide this training.

Jade McCutcheon is assistant professor of theatre, and John Galland is director of the Laboratory Management Institute, the University of California, Davis.
www.research.ucdavis.edu/LMI

GRADUATE JOURNAL

Tropical PhD

Growing up in Sweden, I realized that I did not like cold weather. My mother used to read me a book about a penguin that had the same problem. One day he decided he had had enough, so he set sail towards the tropical Pacific in a bathtub. I did the same thing, although I did not use a bathtub. I thought life would be much more pleasant in Hawaii. I was right.

To secure my status as a subtropical resident for several years, I decided to pursue a PhD in oceanography at the University of Hawaii. Science, combined with some fun under the sun, seemed like an excellent idea. To limit the number of days spent in cold weather, I was drawn to the study of coral reefs; more precisely, the study of the effects of rising atmospheric carbon dioxide on this ecosystem. Sunny skies, warm waters, beautiful scenery and the most costly experiment mankind has ever undertaken: burn all fossil fuels and just sit back and watch. Could life get any better than this?

But recently it struck me that the day will soon come when I might see an end to both an initially endless PhD and the coral reefs as we know them, leaving me the question of what to do next. I have great hopes of presenting you with the answer to that before the end of the year. Although life is still very pleasant in Hawaii, I am getting the bathtub ready. The quest for a new destination has begun.

Andreas Andersson is a final-year PhD student in oceanography at the University of Hawaii.