

# MOVERS

**William Harris, president and chief executive, Science Foundation Arizona**



**2001-06:** Director-general, Science Foundation Ireland, Dublin

**2000-02:** Vice-president for research, University of South Carolina, Columbia

**1996-2000:** President and executive director, Columbia University Biosphere 2 Center, Tucson, Arizona; and associate director, Earth Institute, Columbia University, New York

It's not often that a scientific career reaches beyond one's own discipline. But William Harris has helped to transform scientific infrastructures around the world: a commitment to science and education is the cornerstone of his career.

A chemistry professor at William and Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia, first brought the subject to life for Harris, who went on to do graduate work in spectroscopy at the University of South Carolina (USC) and then to teach at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina. He learnt about biology on a sabbatical at the National Institutes of Health, where he used spectroscopy with biophysicist Ira Levin. A sabbatical at the National Science Foundation (NSF) led to a job as programme director in physical chemistry.

By the end of his 18 years at the NSF, Harris was director of mathematical and physical sciences, overseeing a \$750-million annual budget. In addition to establishing 24 science and technology centres to support interdisciplinary research, his greatest satisfaction came from developing the research programme for undergraduates in the chemistry division — which became a standard throughout the NSF divisions. "I became a person who could help gifted scientists do their science better," says Harris of his ability to remove barriers to scientific work.

Although he calls his position at the NSF "the best job I ever had", Columbia University offered an opportunity that he couldn't refuse — to head Biosphere 2, an enclosed environmental system that aroused controversy about how self-contained it really was. Harris's interest in climate problems was fired by Columbia's ambitious agenda for its Earth Institute experiment. "It was a challenge to do something that hadn't been done before — and make an important education statement in the process," he says.

After a brief stint back at USC, as vice-president for research, Harris was head-hunted to lead Science Foundation Ireland. In five short years, he's built Ireland's research — engaging its universities in previously uncultivated areas such as biotechnology, and attracting distinguished scientists from the Max Planck Institutes and Bell Labs to set up research centres. He has been asked to advise the European Commission, China and India on developing their scientific economics.

But it is to Arizona that Harris moves next. He will soon head Science Foundation Arizona, a new non-profit institute dedicated to doing for Arizona what he has done for Ireland — build the new research programmes from the ground. ■  
**Virginia Gewin**

## SCIENTISTS & SOCIETIES

### Postdoc prep

Postdocs in the United States have never been held in the same level of esteem as other professionals. Members of under-represented groups, such as women and racial minorities, face additional challenges in the scientific workforce, including feelings of isolation, cultural misunderstandings and difficulties in communicating need. Mentoring and support from faculty members, staff and peers have been cited as key factors in ensuring postdoctoral success.

The National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) is committed to serving the diverse needs of the entire postdoctoral community. We lead the Diversity Committee of the NPA, which focuses on advocacy and providing resources for members of racial/ethnic minority groups, women, people with disabilities, and those of different sexual orientation. The committee has been very active since its inception three years ago, including organizing workshops at the annual meetings of the NPA, the Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science, and the Compact for Faculty Diversity's Institute on Teaching and Mentoring.

In partnership with the Alliance for Graduate Education and the Professoriate Program of Howard University (in Washington DC) and the University of

Texas at El Paso, we have created a unique programme called the Institute on Preparing for the Postdoctorate in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. This two-day workshop seeks to help students nearing the end of graduate school to understand the importance of postdoctoral training and the steps necessary to ensure a successful experience. About 40 students took part in each of the past two years.

Topics of discussion include different types of postdoctoral opportunities, how to select the best institution and lab, how to secure funding and grants, developing a career plan, and the unique experiences of under-represented groups. Speakers include former and current postdoctoral fellows, faculty members interested in hiring postdocs and representatives from funding agencies. The key features of the workshop are that it is informal and interactive. We have received positive feedback from participants and speakers. We will be expanding this year by providing similar programmes at other organizations with postdocs and at scientific society meetings. ■

**Jabbar Bennett is chair and Cherie Butts is vice-chair of the NPA's Diversity Committee.**

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#### GRADUATE JOURNAL

### On Mozart's wavelength

One of the most rewarding aspects of being a graduate student is being sent halfway around the world to present your research and interact with other scientists at scientific meetings. The distance travelled is not important, but it is always nice to combine the professional experience with explorations of a new city, country, continent and culture. As I write this entry, I have just attended the European Geosciences Union meeting in Vienna, Austria. Although Vienna is located far away from any ocean, what can go wrong when you have unlimited access to Wiener schnitzel, apple strudel and Mozart?

At the first conference I attended, I was scheduled to present my research as one of the last talks of the entire conference. An impressive crowd of about a dozen showed up, including the organizers and four fellow students from Hawaii! On my second appearance, I was scheduled to speak just before the legendary oceanographer Wally Broecker, and a steady flow of people filled the room until it was announced that Wally's talk was cancelled owing to illness, and the majority left. Luckily, I have not spoken to empty seats since then. Each conference has pushed me closer to graduation, articles have been solicited and published, collaborations initiated, postdoc positions offered and friends made all over the world. In addition, I have enjoyed apple strudel to the tunes of Mozart in the place where they were composed more than two centuries ago. ■  
**Andreas Andersson is a final-year PhD student in oceanography at the University of Hawaii.**