

MOVERS

Johann-Dietrich Wörner, chairman of the German Aerospace Centre



1995-2007 President, Technical University Darmstadt, Germany

1990-1995 Professor of solid-structure engineering, Technical University Darmstadt, Germany

1995-2007 Professor of statics, Technical University Darmstadt, Germany

In a sense, science managers are like architects of glass buildings. "Both must aim for transparency and stability," says Johann-Dietrich Wörner, the new chairman of the German Aerospace Centre and a former building engineer.

Wörner faces considerable challenges in his new post, as the centre has lost a bit of its sparkle in recent years. Two years ago, the budget of its flagship component, the German space agency (DLR), had shrunk so much that scientists feared it would become difficult to participate in space missions at all. The agency coordinates national space projects and manages Germany's contributions to European Space Agency (ESA) missions. Pictures taken by the German-built high-resolution stereo camera on board ESA's Mars Express thrilled scientists worldwide.

The DLR has to fight to stand its ground, says Günther Hasinger, a director at the Max Planck Institute for Extraterrestrial Physics in Garching. He is optimistic that Wörner can meet the challenge. "The national space budget for the next years has happily increased, not least thanks to the community's loud complaining," he says. "I hope Wörner will treat space research with the priority it deserves."

Wörner knows it will be hard to meet all expectations. Space research and astronomy have to compete with other DLR-funded activities such as aeronautics and transport-and energy-related research. With more than 5,000 staff, the DLR is Germany's biggest research institution.

Wörner gathered management experience during the period he spent as president of the Technical University Darmstadt, one of Germany's most progressive universities in terms of academic and administrative autonomy. He earned his PhD at the university, and took a post as professor there. His presidency at Darmstadt, which began in 1995, marked his shift from passionate engineer to diplomatic science manager.

The DLR's offer came just at the right time. "I had achieved my goals at Darmstadt," he says. "It was time to move on." As president of the only German university that has a special law affording it a higher-than-usual degree of autonomy, he enjoyed considerable leeway in appointing professors and setting up new programmes.

But Wörner knows that, given its size and the scope of its mission, the DLR is in a different league. He will have to act as a mediator for ESA, the German government and the country's space-science community — a task, he says, that will require diplomacy, sensitivity and a thick skin. ■

Sophie Stigler

NETWORKS & SUPPORT

Minority report

Doing science requires a certain level of perseverance, a great deal of independence and self-motivation, and a whole lot of optimism. Coincidentally, these characteristics are epitomized by most of the immigrant workers that come to the United States in search of jobs and a better quality of life. Paradoxically, these people are very underrepresented in science.

That is why the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Gilliam Fellowship is helping underrepresented students succeed in science. It offers the scientific community a different perspective on life and research.

In June, I will be among the first group of students to graduate from the new biophysics department at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), having worked on a number of research projects including fungal genomics, immunobiology, imaging and most recently cancer immunotherapy under the mentorship of Manuel Penichet. My training has been fruitful, resulting in a number of co-authored publications, a first-authored article and an American Association for Cancer Research-Thomas J. Bardos Award. My two-year project was also my inspiration for the proposal that helped me earn a Gilliam fellowship.

But research was not always part of my agenda. My goals were shaped by participation in programmes such as the National Institutes of Health-sponsored MARC (minority access to research careers) programme, which has sent minority students to graduate studies in top universities. This autumn I will begin graduate studies as the first Whitcome Fellow in the Molecular Biology Interdepartmental PhD programme at UCLA. My plan is to master the intricacies of multidisciplinary research, combining quantitative approaches and molecular biology to address important fundamental questions that lead to a better understanding of disease.

Having a Gilliam fellowship has opened many doors for me, as it has for many other motivated and independent students. I hope that other programmes will also seek out underrepresented students and further diversify the scientific community. Increasing the presence of minorities in science will provide valuable input from people with diverse points of view. Likewise, minority communities will gain from the wealth of opportunities that science careers can provide. ■

Jose Rodriguez is an undergraduate senior at UCLA.

POSTDOC JOURNAL

The benefactor

Having been educated at a women's college, it's a bit strange that my greatest ambition as a postdoctoral fellow is to be a 'kept' woman. I openly admit that one of my priorities is to satisfy my 'benefactor' — that is, the foundation that funds my external postdoctoral fellowship.

In truth, I groomed myself for this role. I worked diligently to make myself attractive to potential sponsors. The likelihood of being overlooked or rejected was high, so I learned how best to sell myself. I cultivated the qualities that would help me stand out from other appealing candidates, and I consciously made the effort to attract the right external support. After all, promises of increased financial security, additional resources, subsidized travel and a personal allowance were powerful incentives.

Of course, such generous patronage comes with certain expectations and conditions. I'm obliged to report what I do, where I travel and what I spend. I'm encouraged to always be at my personal best and to prove myself to be a good choice, a safe bet and a valuable investment. In short, I'm required to perform. Nonetheless, I'm proud of negotiating the financial arrangements that provide for my needs. I have no regrets about my ambitious and deliberate pursuit of an individual postdoctoral fellowship to support my research goals. ■

Maria Ocampo-Hafalla is a research fellow at Cancer Research UK's London Research Institute.