

MOVERS

Erich Nigg, director of the Biozentrum, University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland



1999–2008: Director, Department of Cell Biology, Max Planck Institute for Biochemistry, Martinsried, Germany

1995–99: Department of Molecular Biology, University of Geneva, Switzerland

1987–95: Swiss Institute for Experimental Cancer Research, Epalinges, Switzerland

After earning a PhD in biochemistry at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETHZ) in 1976, Erich Nigg sought culturally and scientifically enriching experiences in California and Switzerland's French-speaking region before he was lured to Germany's Max Planck Institute for Biochemistry for the past decade. He is now headed home again to lead the University of Basel's Biozentrum.

Nigg's moves have prompted several shifts in his research focus. That eclectic background positioned him to head the Biozentrum, one of the first basic research institutes to foster interdisciplinary collaborations in cell biology, microbiology and structural biology. But, he says, "the price I've paid for changing my scientific research many times during my early career is the long time to gain recognition".

Nigg's initial focus was on cell-membrane dynamics and his doctoral dissertation explored protein mobility through cancer cell membranes. He followed this interest to sunny San Diego, to a postdoc position with John Singer at the University of California. "You are never as free to focus solely on your own work as you are when doing a postdoc," he says, regretting that some students don't take the opportunity to study abroad and learn about other cultures. At the University of California, he learned to use antibodies to visualize cell structures.

After returning to the ETZH for a few years, he opted for a tenure-track position at the Swiss Institute for Experimental Cancer Research, where he concentrated on the emerging topic of cell-cycle regulation by kinases. After a period at the University of Geneva, he was offered a directorship at the Max Planck Institute for Biochemistry in Martinsried, Germany. Nigg couldn't turn down the sheer power of Max Planck's instrumentation and financial support, which over the past decade has enabled him to study cell division using both cell biology and proteomics.

Nigg plans to use his varied experience to help young Biozentrum faculty members achieve their career goals. The Biozentrum had a common complaint — a generation gap had opened up when the original scientific leaders retired, says Susan Gasser, director of the Novartis-funded Friedrich Miescher Institute for Biomedical Research (FMI) in Basel. She helped convince Nigg that the region was developing into a strong biosciences hub. "Erich's recruitment demonstrates that Switzerland is able to attract back top scientists who took leadership positions in other countries," she says.

Virginia Gewin

BRICKS & MORTAR

Toyota motors ahead

Despite a significant downturn in the US car industry, Toyota is going ahead with plans to establish a research institute in Michigan. It will employ 60–70 scientists, who will focus largely on developing ways to mitigate motor vehicles' environmental impact.

Last April the company announced the creation of the Toyota Research Institute of North America in Ann Arbor. It plans to spend US\$100 million during the next four years on research topics, to include energy efficiency, environmentally friendly materials and fuel optimization.

Toyota spokeswoman Cindy Mahalak says the shaky economy isn't affecting plans for the research institute. "The \$100 million was not an additional investment. It was already in place," she says. The institute's use of an existing space in the Toyota Technical Center helps bolster the research budget, she adds. Leading the institute is Noboru Kikuchi, a professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Michigan and a director of Toyota research and development laboratories in Japan.

The institute has already hired 40 researchers and administrative staff, Mahalak says. It plans to add 10 more research scientists by the

end of this year and another 20 by 2010. Toyota is currently advertising five research positions (most requiring a doctorate) in the areas of microelectric mechanical systems, biotech materials, nanomaterials and battery research.

The other positions will include opportunities for postdocs and students, according to a company spokesman. Earlier this year, Toyota advertised for two collaborators from academic universities and national labs for research in catalysis and nanotechnology at the centre as part of its quest to cut greenhouse-gas emissions. The spokesman declined to comment on whether the collaborations are in place.

According to one industry analyst, Toyota's decision to go ahead with its research institute plans in the face of a weak industry reflects the company's strong financial position globally.

"The auto manufacturers are not all in the same position, by any means," says Tom Libby, senior director of industry analysis for J. D. Power and Associates in Westlake Village, California. Pursuing research even in an uncertain economic climate is a wise move, he adds. "You need new products and processes to remain competitive."

Karen Kaplan

POSTDOC JOURNAL

Calm before the storm

When I started, I wasn't sure what my new department was expecting of me. Would I immediately be asked to perform like the other permanent academic staff, deftly juggling teaching and research commitments while simultaneously balancing administrative responsibilities? Day one did begin with the inevitable admin, but with secretaries' help it was quickly done, causing minimal stress.

I braced myself for the second wave of work. Instead, I received more time — time I used to think about my research. I pinched myself, but the free time didn't go away. I had time to plan how I'm going to teach maths-phobic students about mathematical modelling and time to apply for funding. There might even have been time for a cup of tea, if our common room wasn't due for demolition.

I think this initial calm is the opportunity to set my research direction within the department for the next few years. I do not expect it to last. So I am using the time to foster local collaborations, submit funding proposals, advertise myself to seminar organizers and even plan the lectures that will eventually compete with my research for time and attention.

Perhaps I should feel guilty when I see Paul scurrying to another lecture, or Carl looking exhausted after a night of proofreading his student's thesis. But I don't. Because I know my time will come.

Jon Yearsley is a lecturer at University College Dublin's school of biology and environmental science.