

Q&A

The former director of the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) in Boulder, Colorado, **Eric Barron** is the new president of Florida State University in Tallahassee.



What prompted you to leave your federal post?

Quite frankly, I wasn't looking for a job. I was very happy as the director of NCAR. Great things are happening there, such as the development of cutting-edge weather-forecast and climate models. And it's an important and prominent institution. But you don't always get to pick when an opportunity arises.

Two different department heads at Florida State University nominated me. Being the president of a major research institution is a substantial job and a step up in the career of anyone who is focused on leadership and management. Plus, my entire career has concentrated on students and alumni and the scholarship of education as well as of research, and I miss it. Also, Florida State is my alma mater.

Can you counter suggestions that you're not qualified for your new position?

My strength is that I have worked in leadership capacities at three institutions, twice as a dean and then as director of NCAR. As a dean, I dealt with the full process of budgeting, promotion and tenure. Running a national lab is another experience that helps promote skills in managing budgets and research portfolios.

Describe your new role's major challenges.

To promote quality and student success in a constrained budget environment. Florida State University is functioning very well, and the faculty care about the institution, but in view of the level of its endowments versus the size of its alumni body, we ought to be able to do a much better

job with philanthropy. This is a challenge that was not present at NCAR.

How do you propose to meet this challenge?

I've actually spent most of my professional life doing essentially the same thing. Throughout my career as a researcher, I wrote grant proposals. When you are a research scientist, the entire idea is to sell what you have — the work you want to do — to someone who would give you money. You think you've got a good idea, and you want money to carry it out.

Philanthropy is related to that. Alumni don't want to give any money without knowing it is going to serve an important purpose. A significant part of success in pursuing philanthropy is having a vision for your institution that you're willing to put out there and believe in, that will connect with your alumni. Scientists don't like to say they're out there selling their ideas but, in fact, every time I wrote a grant proposal, that's what I was doing, so this experience translates directly.

What motivates you?

Trying to make whatever I'm working on better, and not being afraid of opportunity. I loved being a researcher, but I think my entire career is based on doors that were open that I walked through. Some doors opened because of hard work, others because I was in the right place at the right time. Don't be afraid to assess different challenges and take on interesting opportunities that have the potential to be satisfying.

Has serendipity played a role in your career?

Absolutely. As an undergraduate, I was a geology student who went into oceanography, but I kept changing my mind

about what I wanted to do, and finally decided on climate and Earth history. I was using complex models similar to those being used to simulate modern and future climate. One of my professors suggested I apply for a supercomputing fellowship at NCAR. I didn't think I had a chance, but I applied and got it in 1976. I've had a connection with NCAR ever since, which led to my directorship offer in 2008. At Pennsylvania State University, I was young to be offered a dean position, but they took a chance on me.

What's the best advice you've received?

I'm not sure whether I was told this by a mentor or got it from watching people above me in a hierarchy, but I've always tended to work at a high level of transparency and to focus on personal relationships within the institution at which I am working. People — parents, faculty, staff — hear about problems in institutions. If you're willing to lay it all out and explain your decision, you ought to be able to defend it. That openness and willingness to be approachable takes you a long way in making the problems easier to deal with. People respond better to knowing about those problems than they would if they think you're hiding something.

Can you identify the career skill it was most difficult to hone?

When I was younger, I was very introverted. I was a nerdy kid. Today, I have no fear in walking up to people and talking to them. I had to deliberately realize that you don't have anything to lose by approaching people and being friendly. ■

Interview by Karen Kaplan

IN BRIEF

Institute gets gift windfall

A US\$50-million gift to the Sanford-Burnham Medical Research Institute in La Jolla, California, will help to employ at least 30 researchers. Renamed in honour of philanthropist T. Denny Sanford, who made the donation, the institute plans to hire the new faculty members in the next 5 years, says Andrea Moser, the centre's vice-president for communications. The focus will be on areas such as cancer, neurodegeneration, diabetes, stem cells and infectious and inflammatory disease. The faculty posts will translate into about 300 positions in all, including research and lab-support jobs, Moser says. The gift will be paid over a 5-year period, with the first instalment expected soon.

Boost for brain research

A research and training consortium with a focus on combating neurodegenerative disorders is recruiting 23 PhD students for 3-year fellowships. Known as SyMBA^D (Synapses: from Molecules to Brain and Diseases), the consortium comprises six neuroscience institutes and six technology and pharmaceutical firms from across Europe, and has won €5 million (US\$7 million) in European Union funding through the Marie Curie Initial Training Network. Fellows will receive an annual salary and allowances package of up to €48,600 and will train with and move between the network's members to boost collaborative efforts. Students from any country may apply but Europeans cannot study in their home country.

Plug-and-play DNA

A new synthetic-biology research lab in Emeryville, California, is recruiting its first seven scientists and engineers to design and build sets of standard DNA parts for programming cells. BIOFAB, a combined effort of the biotech non-profit BioBricks Foundation; Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory; Stanford University, Palo Alto; and the University of California, Berkeley, will hire another 22 researchers in the next few months. The lab aims to develop open-source genetic parts that will comprise an 'operating system' for gene expression. "We need to learn how to build a production line that can make many useful parts," says founding director Drew Endy. The facility has US\$1.4 million in funding from the US National Science Foundation and matching funds from its partners.