4-2011

BenchMarks 2011, April 1

The Rockefeller University

SCIENCE FOR THE BENEFIT OF HUMANITY

BENCHMARKS

THE COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY

FRIDAY, APRIL 1, 2011

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Convocation is June 16. Twenty-three students will receive Ph.D.s at this year's Convocation. In addition, honorary degrees will be awarded to Richard Axel of Columbia University and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, and Linda Buck of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. The schedule of events is as follows:

2:30 p.m. Academic Processional from Weiss Lobby to Caspary Auditorium. All are welcome to gather along the route.

3 p.m. Convocation, Caspary Auditorium. Tickets are required.

5 p.m. Reception, Peggy Rockefeller Plaza. All are welcome.

Quantitative biology symposium to occur May 18. The Joshua Lederberg–John von Neumann Symposium: Towards Quantitative Biology, hosted by The Rockefeller University and The Simons Center for Systems Biology at the Institute for Advanced Study, will be held in Caspary Auditorium from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. To register or find further information, please visit www.rockefeller.edu/Lederberg-vonNeumannSymposium.

Bring your child to work. In celebration of national "Take Your Child to Work Day," Human Resources is hosting activities from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Thursday, April 28. Children between the ages of 8 and 12 who are accompanied by an adult are welcome. The registration deadline is Friday, April 8. Contact HR at x8300 or hr@rockefeller.edu.

Campus becomes smoke-free. Due to established health risks associated with secondhand smoke, smoking is no longer permitted on campus, including the previously designated outdoor areas by the Faculty and Students Club and the patio above the parking lot on 68th Street. Private residences owned by the university including the Graduate Students Residence and Sophie Fricke Hall are exempt from the policy, but public areas of these buildings are also designated non-smoking.

Announcements for this page may be submitted to zveilleux@rockefeller.edu.

BENCHMARKS

Marc Tessier-Lavigne, President
Jane Rendall, Corporate Secretary
Joe Bonner, Director of Communications

Zach Veilleux, Executive Editor

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Town hall meeting kicks off strategic planning process

At Marc Tessier-Lavigne's first town hall meeting, the new president discussed his thoughts on the university's strengths and weaknesses, as well as its place in science and in history. Dr. Tessier-Lavigne outlined his initial priorities, particularly concerning faculty recruitment, and sketched out the process by which he will develop a strategic plan. Printed here is a condensed version of Dr. Tessier-Lavigne's remarks in several important areas that will provide a framework for discussion as the process moves forward.

Rockefeller's mission

Rockefeller's mission, as you know, is threefold: to advance biological and biomedical science, to apply that knowledge for the benefit of humankind — particularly through medicine — and to train the next generation of scientific leaders. That's been the mission since the inception of the institution in 1901. The ambition of the institution has, however, always been much greater. That ambition is to be a world leader in all three of those endeavors, and in particular to be an engine of discovery of not just new knowledge, but of transformative new knowledge that makes a big difference to science and to humanity.

In this, I think it's fair to say that Rockefeller has succeeded spectacularly. It's a legendary place that has had an outsized impact, especially considering how small the faculty is. What's even more fascinating to me is not just that the institution has been successful, but that it has sustained this success over time. The act of creating something truly novel occurs so rarely that it is seldom followed by another such act. That's why we are all fascinated with individuals, institutions and companies that can reinvent themselves constantly, the way Steve Jobs has reinvented Apple multiple times. Rockefeller is like that — it has reinvented itself again and again.

Keys to the university's success

I think it's important to keep in mind the university's keys to success, because that philosophy is going to infuse everything that we do going forward. First and foremost, we have been successful because we hire only the boldest and most creative scientists, who are focused on pivotal problems, and second, we support them to the full, including providing significant financial support for their research programs. Those are the two pillars of the research program, but there is more.

The third key is creating an intense research atmosphere. Simon Flexner, the university's first scientific director, once said, "Science thrives best when research is in the air." Flexner forged that atmosphere with a number of devices, including keeping the institute small, with no departments, to avoid the distractions and fragmentation that can come with them, and fostering interactions between faculty at regular gatherings.

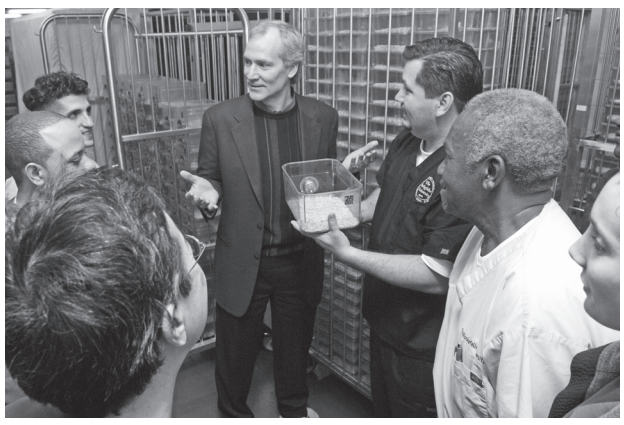

PHOTO: ZACH VEILLEUX

Making rounds. Over the next several weeks, Dr. Tessier-Lavigne will meet with all faculty members, as well as the staffs of every department, in order to familiarize himself with the university's operations and understand their issues and needs. His first stop was to meet with Collaborative Bioscience Center staff on March 23.

In addition, one of the great strengths of this institution has been a willingness to reinvent itself. There are many examples. One of the most dramatic was in the 1950s when Rockefeller was at the height of its powers and could have rested on its laurels. David Rockefeller asked Detlev Bronk to reassess the institute and see whether any changes needed to be made. This led, among other things, to the creation of the graduate program and the transformation of the institute into a university. And the institution was, of course, as successful in the second half of the 20th century as in the first.

Paul Nurse's leadership

It is humbling to be taking over this position from Paul Nurse, who, as you all know, is a remarkable person and exceptional leader. I am very grateful for all he has done for the institution and to help me during this transition period as well.

When Paul reevaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the organization several years ago, he reaffirmed Flexner's vision as the surest route to success. He also saw a number of issues that needed addressing. These included, first, rekindling the interactive environment of the institution. This led to improvements to the university's infrastructure — including the building of the Collaborative Research Center — and also the creation and reinvigoration of institutions such as the Monday lectures and various committees.

Paul also focused on updating our recruiting practices with the development of the open search mechanism. He focused on the financial health of the institution, addressing budget shortfalls he inherited back in 2003 and providing fiscal discipline that allowed us to weather the recent financial storm better than most. Paul also spent time building a terrific leadership team who, along with their staffs, provide the outstanding operations that sustain the university. Having been at three great organizations, I put Rockefeller's operations, as least as I have seen them so far, on par with the very best I have been associated with.

Lastly, Paul increased transparency in decision-making through a number of mechanisms, including empowering the academic council.

The strategic planning process

The approach to strategic planning I will use here will be the same one I have used repeatedly in the past. In the next several months I will familiarize myself with the people and the operations of the university. I will then engage with the community to get their input, beginning initially with the faculty and executive leadership, and then consulting more widely with scientists, students, postdocs, staff, supporters of the university including trustees, and various consultative bodies.

Working together, we will aim to deliver

continued on page 2

After cuts, university to close FY2011 budget with a small surplus

Cost reductions first announced last spring have successfully stabilized the university's finances, according to a recent analysis of the operating budget. The university expects to close out the 2011 fiscal year, which ends June 30, with a modest surplus.

"Although making cuts to the 2011 fiscal year budget was not easy, the effect has been to return the university's finances to balance, which is what we had hoped for," says Jim Lapple, vice president for finance and treasurer. The cuts, which were announced in March 2010 and went into effect in July, included a $3.7 million reduction in research spending and a $10.3 million reduction in non-science spending, including the elimination of 50 positions. The cuts became necessary after the global financial crisis caused a significant drop in the market value of the university's endowment, which contributes about a third of the university's operating funds. The reductions to research spending were made in consultation with a faculty budget advisory committee chaired by Mary Jeanne Kreek.

Since bottoming out in early 2009, the capital markets have somewhat stabilized. As of February 2011, the university's endowment showed a positive preliminary fiscal year return of 13 percent. The university's endowment spending formula, however, is calculated as a percentage of average market value over the previous three years. "This has the effect of tempering sudden increases and decreases in the endowment's value, but also causes us to feel the effect over a longer period of time," explains Mr. Lapple.

"After careful review of the university's current finances and consultation with our Board of Trustees, I am pleased to announce that we will not need to implement further cost reductions at this time," says Marc Tessier-Lavigne, the university's president. "For the 2012 fiscal year, we will maintain the cost reductions that were put into effect last year and leave the current laboratory funding formula unchanged."

In addition, the Board's Finance and Operations committee has approved for the coming year an aggregate three percent salary increase pool, which will be awarded based on merit, and a 4.4 percent increase in the student stipend, to $33,000 per year.

"We were fortunate to be able to include in the upcoming year's budget a salary and stipend increase that will help offset increases in the cost of living in New York and keep our compensation competitive with that of other local institutions," says Dr. Tessier-Lavigne.

Town hall (continued from page 1)

a strategic plan that will help guide our activities for the next five to ten years. The current target is to have it completed by May of 2012, which will give us enough time to be thoughtful. Of course, if we find we can come to a conclusion sooner than that, we will do so. The precise approach will be refined in coming weeks as I meet with more people and get more input.

Faculty recruitment

We should look to build on the success of Paul's open search mechanism. It functions extremely well and has been successful at multiple levels. It's a great tool for identifying top talent and for maintaining a very high bar in our recruitment. It has brought faculty together in a common purpose. And it also allows junior faculty candidates to see how we operate as a community, which helps with their recruitment.

As with everything we do, it will be important to assess how well we are doing, and whether there are any aspects that need changing. For example, in the open search, are we missing certain types of talent? We also need to look at the balance of junior hiring and mid-career hiring. I'm a big believer in the importance of junior hiring, but the university has also been very well served by mid-career hiring in the past. For that kind of hiring, there is also the question of how much should be opportunistic — hearing about a great person who might be interested in coming — and how much should be strategic — where we want to build a particular area or field. Paul had budgeted one mid-career hire for every two junior hires, which seems reasonable, but as part of our strategic planning we will be reassessing all of these types of issues.

There are a few other issues to consider with strategic hiring. When done properly, strategic hiring should be made as part of a broader reflection about where science is going, and where we want Rockefeller to go. What do we want to achieve and what kinds of synergies could be created by adding particular efforts? We also need to catalog and assess existing or emerging fields where we are underweight, and decide which ones we should invest in, and, just as important, which ones we should not invest in — as a small institution, we may decide there are areas that we should not enter because we can't achieve critical mass and excellence in them. And it doesn't have to be either/or: for some fields, we may be able build strong programs by working with our neighbors or other local institutions.

Our goal as we move forward with recruitment will be to find the right balance of these activities to create the right community of scientists to tackle the major scientific challenges of the 21st century and to position Rockefeller for continued leadership.

The graduate program

The strength of the graduate program and the successful recruitment of junior faculty go hand in glove. The best junior faculty are attracted to institutions that have the best graduate programs because they know they are going to build their labs initially with graduate students. The best graduate students are attracted to institutions that have dynamic junior faculty, so a virtuous cycle is set up. That's where I believe we are today.

We compete very effectively, but as a matter of course we will analyze thoroughly whether we're accessing all of the top talent nationally and internationally. Just as important, we will also assess whether we're serving our graduate students well.

The Rockefeller University Hospital

Rockefeller since its inception has had a focus on human subjects research and research that's relevant to disease. We're fortunate to have the hospital, and with the renewal of the Clinical and Translational Science Award from the NIH, it is stable financially. It is very difficult for academics at most institutions around the world to do human subjects research, but this is something we can do here at Rockefeller. It's a great asset, and one of the questions we will be asking is how can we maximize its impact.

We're in something of a golden age of translational research. The advances in biological science over the past decades — the sequencing of the human genome, the development of representative mouse models of disease and so forth — mean that we can tackle disease systematically and broadly, in the same way that basic scientists like to tackle basic mechanisms. Rockefeller is uniquely positioned for that.

Areas of weakness

In thinking about hiring and our balance of activities, I do have to point out areas where I think we have weaknesses. One is the representation of women on our faculty. We have nine exceptional women faculty members, but that is just 13 percent of our faculty, and there's really only one word for that: unacceptable. It's important as a matter of fairness and equity, but also because of our educational mission. Close to 50 percent of our students are female and we need a better representation on our faculty as role models.

One of the areas we will focus on is how to rectify this situation. Of course this is something that the university has tried to address in the past, but we will redouble our efforts. We will work to identify and remove obstacles that might make the university unattractive to potential women candidates, and will ensure that we access the largest pool possible of talented women scientists for recruitment.

Poor representation on our faculty is also seen with underrepresented minorities, and that's an area where we also need to place considerable efforts.

Community

All the members of our community, not just the faculty and students, are important. The postdocs and staff, both scientific and non-scientific, are the unsung heroes of the university, the people who make this place work. Postdocs often fall through the cracks, and it's important to make sure we are meeting their needs.

The operations of the staff are as good as any I have seen, and that reflects the quality of the people and the hard work that those people put in to their jobs. I will continue to focus on driving excellence in all our operations. I'm also passionate about making sure that Rockefeller is a great place to work for all our employees.

One of the founders of Genentech used to say that "our greatest asset goes home every night in sneakers." That's just as true of Rockefeller — although since we're in New York City the shoes are probably better. We're in the innovation business, and in that business our most important asset is our people. To ensure that we remain a great place to work, we will make sure that we are focusing on issues related to compensation, culture and work environment.

As for the wider community beyond our gates, we have a number of outreach programs, and we'll be evaluating them. We're part of the greater community, and it's important for us to be engaged in that community. It's the right thing to do, it fits with our educational mission, and it's enabled us to forge wonderful ties with people outside the university. I also think it's important for Rockefeller to lead and be engaged with some of the great national debates, for example on science policy and science funding.

Finances

As you know, as part of the plan that was put together by the faculty and administration, budget cuts were instituted starting in July 2010 that were necessary to stabilize the finances after endowment losses in 2008 and 2009. These cuts amounted to $14 million on both the scientific and non-scientific sides and resulted in the loss of 50 positions, including some through attrition but also some through layoffs.

Thanks to all the hard work and the pain of the past few years, our finances are now quite stable. We're not out of the woods entirely — there will need to be a continued reduction in spending over the next few years because of the formula we use to calculate the endowment's contribution to the operating budget — but we are currently looking at a structural deficit of around $5 to $10 million, which is manageable. To deal with this, we will maintain most of the cost reductions implemented last year, we will work to increase fundraising initiatives and we are accumulating operating surpluses into a reserve. The aim is to offset the reduction in endowment income while waiting for the endowment to fully recover. Nonetheless, as a result of the stabilization of our finances, we have been able to budget for fiscal year 2012 an increase in the salary pool for employees and an increase in the student stipend (see "After cuts, university to close FY2011 budget with a small surplus," page 1).

The stability of our finances going forward will depend on a number of factors: the pace of endowment recovery, the continued success of fundraising and the continued success of our labs in securing sponsored research grants. We are expecting downward pressure on the NIH budget, and that is something we are going to be monitoring very carefully. We will be putting together contingency plans for faculty who might be affected.

A full financial strategy addressing the endowment, grant support and development activities will be a cornerstone of the strategic plan.

Rockefeller's place in history

There are a small number of institutions that are great not just for a few years or a few decades, but in a timeless way over a period of centuries. I believe that Rockefeller, by virtue of its stature, by virtue of its track record of accomplishment, by virtue of its brand, can join the ranks of those institutions that endure and lead over such extended periods.

One of the great watershed events in science in the next several decades will be the emergence of China and other nations as research powerhouses. This is an exciting development, and we have to ask if there are specific steps we should be taking as a result, for example to develop ties or joint programs overseas.

Equally, in the developing world, there continues to be an enormous need for help at a number of levels, in building scientific institutions and also addressing disease, particularly infectious disease. We have a legacy at Rockefeller in addressing infectious diseases and there's an opportunity to reaffirm our leadership in this area.

I think we should be asking ourselves not just what can we do for the next five or ten years, but is there anything we should be doing to help ensure our leadership over the next century? Are there specific kinds of scientific investments we should make, or specific aspects of our organizational management that we should change? Are there enhancements to our infrastructure or our campus that we should make? In planning over the next year, I believe we should focus not just on the near term, but also on that long-term view.

MILESTONES

PROMOTIONS, AWARDS AND PERSONNEL NEWS

Awarded:

Titia de Lange, the 2011 Vilcek Prize in Biomedical Science. The $100,000 prize recognizes her body of research on mechanisms that help maintain genome stability, in particular on telomeres, the elements that protect chromosome ends from unnecessary repair and mediate their replication. This work has led to a greater understanding of how telomeres protect chromosome ends, and what happens when telomere function is lost during the early stages of tumorigenesis. Dr. de Lange is Leon Hess Professor and head of the Laboratory of Cell Biology and Genetics. She will receive the prize at the Vilcek Foundation's annual awards presentation dinner in New York City in April.

Elaine Fuchs, the 2011 Albany Medical Center Prize in Medicine and Biomedical Research. Dr. Fuchs, recognized for her contributions toward realizing the vast potential of stem cells to treat or reverse disease, shares the prize with James A. Thomson of the University of Wisconsin in Madison and Shinya Yamanaka of Kyoto University in Japan. Dr. Fuchs is Rebecca C. Lancefield Professor, head of the Laboratory of Mammalian Cell Biology and Development and a Howard Hughes Medical Institute Investigator. At $500,000, the Albany Prize is the largest award in medicine and science in the United States.

Elaine Fuchs, the 2011 Passano Prize. The award honors Dr. Fuchs's contributions to the understanding of skin biology and its disorders, including genetic syndromes, stem cells and cancers. Dr. Fuchs will receive the award and give the Passano Foundation Award lecture April 11 at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

Promoted (academic appointments):

Mayte Suarez Farinas, to research assistant professor, Krueger Lab.

Hired:

Uchenna Anene, administrative assistant, Purchasing.

Miriam Baker, research assistant, McEwen Lab.

Maria Ines Baptista, postdoctoral associate, Brivanlou Lab.

Aurelia Delaune, postdoctoral associate, Fischetti Lab.

Robin Dunlap, copy editor, Rockefeller University Press.

Martin Gallardo, animal attendant, Comparative Bioscience Center.

Laure Gineau, foreign research intern, Casanova Lab.

Tamar Hermesh, postdoctoral associate, Casanova Lab.

Steven Josefowicz, postdoctoral associate, Allis Lab.

Julian Lange, foreign research intern, Stebbins Lab.

Theodore Leondaridis, foreign research intern, Pfaff Lab.

Michelle Mah, research support assistant, Genomics Resource Center.

Nathan McKenney, animal technician, Hudspeth Lab.

Catarina Milheirico, postdoctoral associate, Tomasz Lab.

Jose Minarro, visiting professor, Kreek Lab.

Geraldine Nicollet, foreign research intern, Pfaff Lab.

Paul Olinares, postdoctoral associate, Chait Lab.

Jeremy Owen, postdoctoral associate, Brady Lab.

Lucy Petro, postdoctoral associate, Freiwald Lab.

Philipp Rommel, foreign research intern, Nussenzweig Lab.

Ziv Shulman, postdoctoral fellow, Nussenzweig Lab.

Alexander Vogt, visiting student, Rice Lab.

Zachary Walker, research assistant, Greengard Lab.

This publication lists new hires, awards and promotions. Staff promotions are listed yearly; academic promotions and appointments are listed monthly.