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Life Science Conflict Grows from Stem Cells

Declining resources, constrained space cause interdepartmental struggles

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Only a few years ago, former University President Lawrence H. Summers told alumni in Washington that Harvard could soon resemble Renaissance Florence. The key, he said, would be development of the life sciences.

But an unprecedented financial downturn has forced the University to reexamine its ambitious plans in recent months. Far-flung optimism has given way to greater fiscal pragmatism, and that has meant trade-offs, even in the life sciences.

"When life sciences research at Harvard was expanding, and money was plentiful, one could say that Harvard could have it all—vibrant basic research and targeted initiatives that might capitalize on specific new opportunities," said one Molecular and Cellular Biology professor who asked that he not be named to protect his relationship with the University. "But now, unfortunately, since we cannot grow, the situation involves making choices."

The delay has compelled the University to plan to relocate stem cell researchers originally bound for Allston to a Cambridge facility currently occupied by faculty members in the MCB department—a move that has triggered backlash from professors who object to the administration's apparent prioritization of stem cell research at the expense of their own discipline.

'NETHERLAND'

Harvard's stem cell researchers, who are dispersed across Boston, have long envisioned a unified research space in Allston, a dream that University Provost Steven E. Hyman has sought to turn into a reality. But that effort has come at a cost.

Some researchers in the MCB department have come to view the Stem Cell and Regenerative Biology department (SCRB) as the administration's favorite child—a pet project initiated by Summers and loyally continued into the present by Hyman, according to one MCB professor.

"They will go to extremes to make Stem Cell happy," said the unnamed MCB Professor, citing the plan to move the laboratories of several MCB faculty out of the Sherman-Fairchild Building in order to make room for incoming SCRB faculty.

"I think it sends a message. It's one thing to build a big stem cell institution in Allston, where you're launching a whole special project," said Jim Hentle, an MCB lab administrator in Fairchild. "It's another thing to displace a whole department and send them to who-knows-what netherland."

Some MCB professors say that the displacement of their department indicates a "corporatization" of science—evidence that the administration has been seduced by the financial potential of stem cell research.

"Why else would somebody do that in a time when there's no money available?" said MCB professor Guido Guidotti about the eviction of the MCB professors. "The idea is, stem cell is going to provide fame and fortune."

But the administration has continued to state that no areas of the life sciences—or any departments for that matter—are being prioritized.

"The administration has no favorite departments," wrote Harvard's science spokesman B.D. Colen in an e-mailed statement.

Within days of recognizing the likelihood of a slowdown, the administration began consulting with deans and department chairs of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and Harvard Medical School to find alternative space for groups that had planned on moving into Allston, Colen wrote.

"In this case the University had very limited choices under significant time pressure," he wrote.

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PIONEER

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Many of the interdisciplinary science initiatives existing at the University today—including SCRB—are the brainchild of a faculty committee convened during the Summers presidency to examine potential shortcomings in Harvard's research efforts. The group proposed the establishment of cross-school departments to facilitate interdisciplinary science research in areas such as stem cell biology.

"SCRB was the first one to be established, which was logical given that the Harvard Stem Cell Institute had been an incredible success," Colen said in an interview. "And it continues to be, in establishing collaboration among researchers across the University and its affiliated hospitals."

The Stem Cell Institute, which has collected tens of millions of dollars in funding over the past five years, was founded in 2004 at the urging of prominent researchers including Professors Douglas A. Melton and David T. Scadden. Neither scientist responded to repeated requests for comment this week.

Their Institute—which has served in recent years as a reliable fountain of important discoveries in stem cell biology—provides seed grants for researchers.

With the Bush administration restricting government funding to only experiments performed on pre-existing stem cell lines, researchers saw an opportunity for Harvard to become a pioneer in stem cell biology and quickly pressed administrators to aid the newly-emerging field.

"Harvard and some other institutions at the time suggested that we needed to do what we could do to further this promising field and simultaneously work to try to resolve federal restrictions," said Harvard's chief lobbyist Kevin Casey. "There was a sense of urgency in that period that...private parties had to come and step in where the federal government had vacated the field."

PREMEDITATED PRIORITIZATION?

Researchers quickly found themselves enjoying the support of both Summers and Hyman, a neurobiologist who led the University's Mind, Brain, and Behavior Program.

Hyman, a reliable proponent for stem cell research to this day, said in 2006 that he took the job of provost with the intention of revamping interdisciplinary research at the University. Among his goals was the centralization of research efforts scattered across the University.

"The degree of fragmentation across the schools and hospitals is such that sometimes we're not even the sum of our parts," Hyman said.

But there appears to be some skepticism that Hyman's focus today is on the practical benefits of University unification, and not on the lucrative nature of the disciplines involved.

"The current leadership—at least at the level of the Provost—is yielding to that political influence of fundraisers," said MCB professor Markus Meister.

Still, Meister suggested, the University's handling of SCRB had less to do with premeditated prioritization, and more the department's ability to be resilient despite the current economic situation.

"SCRB has raised a lot of funds for its own operations," he said, "at a time when the University doesn't have a lot of funds."

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