

August 1, 2009

Letter from Paul Matsudaira

To the DBS faculty, staff, and students

The Newsletter has been “on leave” but I am happy to report many “new news” since April.

The RCE in Mechanobiology is official but not official. The award was announced officially in April but its official start is planned for sometime around the New Year. The RCE will then occupy its new labs in the Temasek Laboratory (TL) in the Engineering Cluster. Led by Mike Sheetz, the RCE will tackle challenging problems in mechanobiology through interdisciplinary research teams. Prof. Hew and I are backing up Mike as members of the RCE Executive Committee. Actually, the RCE is equivalent to a department at NUS. The numbers are the following: \$150M total funding, 18 faculty, 60 grad students, and 60 postdocs. You can imagine the challenges faced by the faculty and staff in “birthing” such a centre but DBS is in good shape to carry out the tasks.

Cynthia Lee, the DBS Departmental Manager, has moved to the RCE where she is now the Associate Manager. Many LT’s and faculty will remember that Cynthia started as a research technician in the marine biology group. This well deserved and earned promotion will ensure the RCE will be managed by an experienced person and with close collaboration with the department. She and her team are temporarily located in offices on S3 level 4 and will move with RCE to the TL building.

Ms. Lisa Lau is now the DBS Senior Manager. Lisa came to us from the Dean’s Office and is familiar to many of the faculty when she held the portfolio of Faculty Manager. In the last two years, she managed the research programs at the U. of Sydney Medical School. This experience with research program management as well as the familiarity with the operations of the Faculty of Science will serve the department well. During the past months, the baton has transferred from Cynthia to Lisa without a hitch. We are planning how to strengthen departmental operations to support further the DBS missions in education, research, and outreach.

A number of prodigal faculty have returned. Please welcome back Prof. Sodhi (that’s his last name) from his sabbatical at Harvard (pronounced HahVad). Dr. Darren Yeo is coming back from a postdoc at Notre Dame (they play football and pray to Touchdown Jesus). Associate Prof. Adam Yuan, a structural biologist who studies the RNAi processing machinery, has decided to move most of his lab from the TLL to DBS but retain his TLL appointment. He will strengthen the Biophysical Sciences group and will take up temporary lab space in S3.

Speaking of temporary space, have you heard the story of the Maine chicken farmer who was driving his load of chickens on the back of his pickup truck? On his way to the local market, he would stop every few miles, get out, and hit the back of the truck with a baseball bat. After observing this odd behavior a few times, a Maine State Trooper (i.e., police, cop, smokie) stopped the farmer and asked what’s going on. “Well, you see,” said the farmer, “I got a 2 ton load of chickens but this pickup is only rated for a 1 ton load. Have to keep half the chickens in the air.” Why this story? DBS faculty are moving into beautifully renovated research space on levels 5 and 6 of S1A. In the interim, half the department had been “kept in the air” with temporary labs scattered throughout NUS. We are regularizing the space so that eventually all wet bench intensive research groups will have approximately 80-90 sq m. No more

chicken coop research space.

This research space is badly needed but the need is well justified! In the past five months, DBS faculty has secured \$5.7M of competitive grant funding. Congratulations go to Profs. Sawada (2 awards), Song (2 awards), He Wangzhong, Ding, Kumar, Wang Shu, Loh, Li, Swarup, Bickford, Siva, Pan, Webb, Swami, and Hong. Well done!

An area of rapid growth is Environmental Biology. With Singapore firmly committed to be an international showcase for how an urban population can coexist in a tropical setting, there are many opportunities in urban ecology, water management, and other areas. The Environmental Biology faculty has secured large amounts of funding (excess of \$12 million in the last year) and this success will require more space for personnel. Some groups will move into S3 (their wet/dry labs also need regularization).

Wet/dry? No place other than S'pore typifies the saying, "When it rains, it pours". Besides earning research grants, the department has been honored by the recognition bestowed up its members. Let's congratulate the following: Profs. Ding (Provost Chair), Shao Yao (Dean's Chair), Hew (University Emeritus Professor), Wenk (University Outstanding Young Researcher), Chia (TLL, University Outstanding Partner in Research). Not to be outpaced by the faculty, the students have garnered their fair share of kudo's: The China Scholarship Council National Excellent Overseas Graduate Awards to Jiang Jianming (Ng Huck Hui), and Liu Chang (Prakash and Yu Hao) (take note Caltech, Harvard and Stanford had three awardees each), Ray Wu Prize for Excellence in Life Sciences to Liu Chang (Prakash and Yu Hao), Presentation Awards from the Willi Hennig Society to Sujatha Narayanan Kutty and Gwynne Lim (Rudolf Meier). Our undergraduates have also been recognized: Cedric Tan by an Outstanding Undergraduate Researcher Prize (Corlett) and the L'Oreal Singapore for Women in Science National Fellowship went to Minh Le, a former DBS undergraduate and current SMA CSB grad student of Harvey Lodish (MIT) and Bing Lim (GIS. Job Well Done!

Hot off the press! Prof. Tit Meng, President of SIBiol 35th Council and SBO Committee Co-chair, reported the following (with my edits).

"Results from the 2009 International Biology Olympiad in Japan. Overall, With 3 Gold medals and 1 Silver, Singapore ranked 3rd (out of 56 nations) in team results. First and second place went to China (5th, 10th, 12th, 15th) and USA (2nd, 11th, 16th, 19th) with 4 Gold medals.

Our congratulations go to:

Overall 1st Gold medal: Dong Yangzi (HCI)

Overall 3rd Gold: Tan Wei Han (HCI)

Overall 14th Gold: Yuan Chengxiang (RI)

Overall 44th Silver: And Qi Yan (HCI)

Thanks to all the trainers for your continued support and dedication! ... Singapore will be hosting IBO in 2012. We will start planning for this soon. "

Singapore kids in first and third in the world? That beats ping-pong anytime. The S'pore IBO effort was supported by DBS faculty and staff. Thank you!

As you know, this year DBS celebrates its 60th anniversary. To recognize the role of Wallace in explaining the diversity of species in this area (as well as the other guy, Darwin), Prof. Rudolf Meier organized the 28th Meeting of the Willi Hennig Society in June. The meeting was a huge success! It attracted far more participants than was anticipated. 350 from around the world came to Singapore during the height of

the H1N1 worries.

Finally, 320 former and present faculty, staff, and students gathered last Saturday for the 60th Anniversary Tea at the Furama Hotel. Chaired by Prof Ong Bee, the event was a time for remembering. Six former HoDs including the Botany HoDs AN Rao, Gloria Lim, and Goh Chong Jin were able to attend. The entertainment was entertaining! The emcee was Ms. Allison Wee from the Webb lab. Prof. BC Low adlibbed his way through some of the prize awards, "we have a new type of prize, a surprise-NO PRIZE-la". Prof. Chew Fook Tim's lab drew the merlion's share of lottery prizes. Funny coincidence, Prof. Chew picked the names from the box. Prof. Hew walked down the fashion runway as a Mongolian Emperor. Former LT Oi Yee came as the Cheongsam Lady, and Prof. Lam narrated a slideshow on the founding and evolution of DBS. This event will be talked about for years to come. Happy Birthday DBS!

The summer is drawing to a fast end, all of us are busily preparing for teaching. Aloha.