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# PRESIDENT'S Column



## The International Affairs of the ASCB

The exciting basic biomedical research conducted by ASCB members creates an opportunity for us to communicate with cell and molecular biologists worldwide. It also conveys an obligation. Tommy G. Thompson, former governor of Wisconsin and U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, recently observed when asked what he would emphasize if he were still in the race to be his party's nominee for President, "we need to look at how we can incorporate medical diplomacy into our foreign policy and thus enhance respect for America around the world" (*The New York Times*, March 2, 2008). I would argue that in addition to "medical diplomacy," we should also incorporate "biomedical research diplomacy" into our foreign policy. One of the best things that the ASCB offers people around the world is outstanding biomedical science. I am pleased to inform you that we are deeply engaged in developing and nurturing our international affairs.

All of our activities in this regard are initiated and sustained by our International Affairs Committee (IAC) and staff. The IAC is co-chaired by former ASCB President Mary Beckerle and Past President Bruce Alberts. Under their direction, the IAC actively reaches out to countries around the world. A summary of IAC activities can't help but inspire pride about this remarkable work.

### Books for Africa

I recently learned about a growing, international initiative launched by my old friend and colleague Chris Watters, whom I usually meet at the ASCB Annual Meeting. Chris and I were classmates at Princeton, and we worked in adjacent labs in the Biology Department. He is now the Irene Heinz and John LaPorte Given Professor in the Department of Biology at Middlebury College in Vermont. An outstanding and dedicated educator, Chris

was—not surprisingly—awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to teach cellular and molecular biology at Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia in 2003. That's when this story begins.

While in Addis Ababa, Chris became concerned about the severe shortage of textbooks at the University. He convinced several publishers to donate new and recently outdated editions of texts in cell and molecular biology and biochemistry. Using his ever-persuasive personality and his infectious enthusiasm, he acquired sufficient books to fill eight heavy parcels. Chris used the donated textbooks and lab manuals to teach both undergraduates and M.S. students in Ethiopia. When his six-month fellowship was over, he donated the books, in addition to some he had purchased, to the University Science Library there. Even outdated volumes were welcomed, as the library collection included mainly out-of-print books, or in certain disciplines, no books at all!

This lack of adequate teaching and reading materials made a great impression on Chris. Upon returning to Middlebury he put together additional packages containing retired student spectrophotometers and desk copies of new textbooks that he had obtained from publishers. U.S. embassy staff were supportive and helpful to Chris, as he extended his efforts to other Ethiopian universities.

Chris then faced the challenge of how to secure gifts of multiple copies of texts. This was beyond the reach of the New England region's book marketing representatives, so they suggested that Chris make his request through their bosses. In Chris's own words: "a task more easily voiced than accomplished!"

Faced with this increased demand from the African continent, Chris turned to the ASCB IAC (he has been a member since 2005). He asked fellow Committee member and now Past President Bruce Alberts to urge his publisher to donate copies of the recently superseded



Bob Goldman

2003 edition of *Molecular Biology of the Cell*. Alberts took action immediately and convinced his publisher to provide both older and newer editions. Alberts also convinced Chris to spread his good work by including universities in Egypt and other African countries. In this fashion, the stage was set for rapid expansion, requiring even more books. So Chris approached another ASCB member and former president, Harvey Lodish, who arranged for the publisher of his text, *Molecular Cell Biology*, to provide additional books for the program. To date Chris has received books from major publishers including John Wiley, W.H. Freeman, and Garland Science. Recently, I asked Cold Spring Harbor Press to consider donating copies of its lab manuals; the publisher enthusiastically agreed to help the program.

As a result of Chris's hard work and dedication, the ASCB has now launched the "Books for Africa" Project under his direction. "Books for Africa"—in collaboration with numerous U.S. Embassies—now targets 35 universities in Egypt, Tunisia, the Sudan, Tanzania, Burundi, Swaziland, Sierra Leone, and Ethiopia. In addition, Chris has been contacting officials in Cameroon and Algeria to initiate programs with their universities. The costs for "Books for Africa" are now underwritten by the ASCB, and this support is noted in a letter shipped with the books. A snapshot of no-cost ASCB educational resources—the ASCB journals *Molecular Biology of the Cell* and *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, iBioSeminars, and CellBASE—in the form of an attractive ASCB label is affixed to each book (see illustration at right).

### Research Training Onsite in Africa

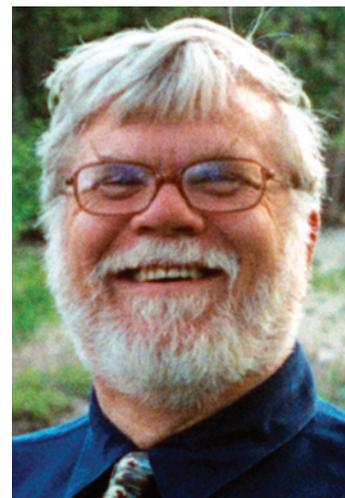
"Books for Africa" is not the end of the story; there are other exciting, ongoing ASCB activities in Africa. Under the leadership of former president Richard McIntosh, the ASCB has just received a three-year grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York for "Research Training in Cell Biology in Tanzania and Ghana." The long-term goal of this program is to help African scientists to confront the continent's most pressing humanitarian challenges. To this end McIntosh has initiated collaborations between African scientists and members of the ASCB's African Team. The latter also includes David Roos of the University of Pennsylvania, Keith Gull of Oxford, and Mahasin Osman of Cornell.

This group of dedicated ASCB members has already started to design short courses aimed at developing the capacity of young African scientists to engage in cell biological research; this research can then be applied to a wide range of problems in the biomedical, veterinary, and plant sciences. In the Carnegie grant proposal McIntosh states that "All these disciplines, as practiced in the USA and Europe, now include a focus on cells because it is through work at the cellular level that we are most likely to achieve critical goals in disease prevention and treatment, as well as improvements in crop yields. Yet basic knowledge about cell biology, as well as the technologies and skills to profit from its power, are currently lacking in much of Africa."

African Team members hope to develop the research skills of young African scientists by providing them with the hands-on laboratory experience required for testing hypotheses regarding cell structure and function. Students will be taught how to design and carry out experiments that employ modern biomedical research techniques and instrumentation. They will also be taught to take advantage of the enormous reservoir of information in genomics and proteomics available on the Web.

The long-range goal of the program is to help a few universities in east and west Africa develop both the instrumentation and the know-how to apply this information in the design and implementation of experiments. Emphasis will be on subjects like the host-pathogen interactions that are of greatest importance to the health and welfare of people in African nations.

The Africa Team has already initiated a partnership with faculty and staff at Sokoine

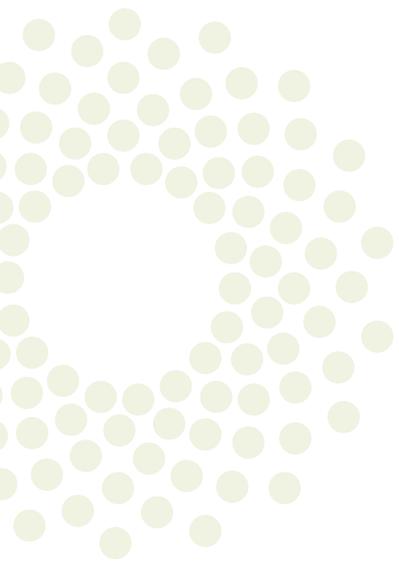


Chris Watters

<p>Molecular Biology of the Cell www.molbiolcell.org</p>	<p>CBE—Life Sciences Education www.lifescied.org</p>	<p>iBioSeminars www.ascb.org/ ibioseminars</p>	<p>CellBASE cellbase.ascb.org</p>
Free		Free	

For more information, visit [www.ascb.org](http://www.ascb.org).

Label affixed to each donated book in the ASCB "Books for Africa" initiative



University in Morogoro, Tanzania. A course will be given there this summer, thanks to the hospitality of Paul Gwakisa—and his colleagues at that university—and members of the Seattle Biomedical Research Institute (SBRI). Patrick Duffy and his colleagues in Seattle, plus key staff at the SBRI, have an ongoing collaboration with Sokoine to offer courses on malaria, sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The generosity of this group enables the ASCB to jump-start its program, offering its first African course only months after the Carnegie grant begins. Biologists from the Universities of Dar es Salaam and Ghana will also attend this offering to help the ASCB arrange courses at other universities in future grant years. An announcement will appear in next month's *ASCB Newsletter*, advising ASCB members on how they might participate in this exciting and innovative program. The program will be administered by ASCB Executive Director Joan Goldberg and her outstanding staff at ASCB headquarters.

### **ASCB Sponsorship of Meetings Abroad**

The ASCB has become an international society in many ways, including its membership. Approximately 25% of our members work outside of the U.S. In light of this, the IAC has pursued cosponsorship of meetings abroad. This activity began last summer with a joint meeting with the European Cytoskeletal Forum titled “Dynamic Interplay between Cytoskeletal and Membrane Systems.” The meeting, held in Dijon, France, attracted 207 scientists from Europe, South America, North America, Australia, and Asia. From all accounts the meeting—organized by ASCB members David Drubin, Laura Machesky, and Daniel Louvard—was a smashing success.

The next international meeting will be held in Japan in 2009 and will be jointly sponsored

by the ASCB, RIKEN, and the Japanese Society for Cell Biology (JSCB). The co-organizers are ASCB members Masatoshi Takeishi of RIKEN and Mark Peifer of the University of North Carolina. The title of the meeting is the “Regulation of Cell–Cell Adhesion and Morphogenesis.”

### **A Partnership for U.S. and International Students**

Both the ASCB Council and the IAC have joined forces to promote interactions between international- and U.S.-based graduate students. This activity was initiated last December at the ASCB Annual Meeting in Washington, DC. Lively discussions, exchange of names and places, and even arrangements to go out together to dinner during the meeting ensued. Future ASCB Annual Meeting events are planned. In response to student requests, ASCB Chief Information Officer David Driggers set up an ASCB Facebook group for continued interaction ([www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=10717340828](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=10717340828)). To date 19 graduate students have joined the group, with three acting as ASCB Facebook administrators. (For more details, see story, p. 36.)

Another international initiative previously covered (see *ASCB Newsletter*, August 2007) is the open access iBioSeminars, spearheaded by ASCB member Ron Vale. Additional international events and expanded initiatives are planned, with more information to come about how members can participate.

The ASCB is a vibrant Society, committed to advancing cell biology and the public good. I hope that ASCB members share my pride in the Society's many laudable programs. In future columns, I will discuss others. As always, I look forward to your ideas and comments. ■

*Comments are welcome and should be sent to [president@ascb.org](mailto:president@ascb.org).*