



## Retiring Research Materials

Dear Labby,

I shut down my lab a number of years ago and have literally a garage full of laboratory notebooks and data reflecting nearly 20 years of work. There are my own notebooks, notebooks from graduate students, postdocs, undergraduates, and technicians, as well as boxes of data in the form of film strips, CDs, floppy disks, and zip drives. The last of my research has been published. My clones have been deposited with colleagues, who generously send them out to people who request them. The antibodies are now sold by companies so I don't have to manufacture them myself. I have deposited some of the images with the ASCB Cell image library. My question

to you is: What do I do with the lab notebooks? To be truthful, I think they are a hazard. We used to use nitrocellulose for western blots, with colorimetric methods to visualize proteins, and those very flammable sheets are taped into the notebooks. Is there an official way to dispose of all this material? And how long, by law, do I need to keep it?

—Data Driven

Dear Data Driven,

Thank you for your evocative inquiry on a subject all retiring academic scientists face. First, what do you *have* to save and why? Some institutions have enacted formal policies as to the custody of research materials from a closing lab (which in many cases are legally the property of the institution). So check your institution's policies at the start.

Second, many journals have policies that require authors to make available upon request various forms of primary data in case of an inquiry. With the passage of time, we authors tend to think this obligation evaporates, but it does not. That said, were a journal editor to follow up on such an inquiry many years after an article's publication, the nonavailability of primary data and the laboratory head's retirement would typically be considered an acceptable explanation.

Third, if any patents were issued or are pending from your research, you should be sure to keep, or transfer to an appropriate party, the records behind the foundational invention(s).

With these considerations duly deliberated, your decision about what to keep and discard hinges on your storage space and willingness to throw things out. (Labby's spouse considers deciding on the disposal of stuff to be far, far beyond the capacity of the human condition.)

In reality it is indeed very difficult to get rid of things that were not only a part of your life in science, but also from a community of people, collected over many years. Your lab is alive with all the memories of many personalities and events. Few scientists in such a position would have been so thoughtful as to actually seek advice, and Labby applauds you for doing so. Closing down a lab isn't easy. There are many retiring or soon-to-retire cell biologists who will appreciate your insightful query. ■

—Labby

*Direct your questions to [labby@ascb.org](mailto:labby@ascb.org). Authors of questions chosen for publication may indicate whether or not they wish to be identified. Submissions may be edited for space and style.*

## Got Questions?

Labby has answers. ASCB's popular columnist will select career-related questions for publication and thoughtful response in the *ASCB Newsletter*. Confidentiality guaranteed if requested. Write us at [labby@ascb.org](mailto:labby@ascb.org). ■