

EDITORIAL

Preparing the Next Generation of Neuroscience Educators

Jean C. Hardwick

Biology Department, Ithaca College, Ithaca New York 14850

This year saw the initiation of Julio Ramirez's NSF-funded project, SOMAS (Support Of Mentors And their Students in the Neurosciences, www.somasprogram.org). This program is designed to provide summer research opportunities for undergraduates while simultaneously mentoring new faculty in neuroscience. The fact that this program exists is due in large part to the sustained efforts of what I like to think of as the "first generation" of undergraduate neuroscience educators. This is not to imply that neuroscience is new to undergraduate education. Rather, the face of neuroscience at the undergraduate level has changed dramatically over the last decades. It has gone from perhaps one, maybe two courses with a neuroscience theme, to full-fledged majors and even departments. The popularity of neuroscience with prospective students has led to the recognition by administrators that having a defined neuroscience program is a marketing plus. New undergraduate programs are being formed every year. These emerging programs often rely on advice from developers of existing programs. Thus, many of our current neuroscience faculty have been the organizing force behind the new face of neuroscience at the undergraduate level. These are our "first generation" undergraduate neuroscience educators. The SOMAS project, I see, as the beginnings of the next phase. It is now time for current faculty to help prepare the next generation of faculty to continue what they have started.

How can current faculty help facilitate the continued growth in undergraduate neuroscience education? Certainly the SOMAS grant is a start; but as wonderful as this program is, it is still limited in impact due to the limitations of funding. Surely there are more ways to provide support for many new faculty as they struggle to balance the demands of setting up a research program, teaching new classes, advising students, and serving on numerous college committees. Many of us already do what we can – mentoring young faculty within our own departments, but what about those new faculty at small schools with no other neuroscience faculty? How can we, as a community of "seasoned veterans" help these individuals navigate the turbulent currents of those first few years?

Perhaps it's time to develop new strategies. Neuroscience, as we all know, is unique in that you can find neuroscience faculty in so many different departments within an institution – biology, psychology, chemistry, physics, pharmacology, philosophy, computer science, and engineering. Currently, there are 60 undergraduate neuroscience programs listed on the Association of Neuroscience Departments and Programs (ANDP) web site (www.andp.org). At the same time, when scrolling through the number of institutions represented in the

Faculty for Undergraduate Neuroscience (FUN) membership, I found over 250 different colleges and universities with faculty that have chosen to identify with an organization geared towards undergraduate neuroscience. This membership certainly suggests that the number of faculty intimately involved in education in neuroscience at the undergraduate level is much higher than "official" sites might lead us to believe. Most of these institutions have a single FUN member. We are a collection of "lone wolves," out there in the trenches, spreading the excitement of neuroscience, but often on our own. This isolation makes it even more difficult for new faculty to find mentors. At the most recent FUN meeting in San Diego, there were discussions about creating "communities" within the organization; creating ways for faculty in geographically distant locations to connect and discuss topics of common importance. This network would be an invaluable asset for new assistant professors trying to determine where to look for research funding, or what sorts of classes to include in a new neuroscience program. At the FUN meeting, we suggested creating new on-line discussion forums with different themes. This resource would make a good start and we are hoping to see these forums become active in the next few months, but this idea of creating communities will need active input from many individuals to make it successful. We will need to recruit the overworked seasoned veteran as well as the overwhelmed first-year faculty member. Somehow, we need to find a way to bring these two groups together. Neuroscience is flourishing at the undergraduate level. The multidisciplinary nature of this field makes it a perfect fit for a liberal arts environment and students are caught up in the excitement and intrigue of a field where the answer to their question is often, "That's a really interesting question, but we still don't know why." As we move into the next generation of neuroscience faculty, we need the current generation to step up and help guide them on their journey.

Dr. Hardwick is an Associate Professor of Biology at Ithaca College and the President of Faculty for Undergraduate Neuroscience. She teaches courses in neurobiology and animal physiology. Her research examines how the nervous and immune systems regulate cardiac function. jhardwick@ithaca.edu

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