

An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at caveman@biologists.com. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.

THE ADVANTAGES OF HAVING A HUGE LAB WITH 20 OR 30 POSTDOCS ARE RAPIDLY OUTWEIGHED BY THE DIFFICULTY OF RECOGNISING THEM INDIVIDUALLY DURING TEA-BREAKS - AND THE EMBARRASSMENT OF NOT RECOGNISING THEM AT ALL DURING INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS!

CAVE LAB 2002...




Size isn't everything

For some, it is important to evaluate, quantify and compare their relative worth in science. How do I stack-up against my neighbor, my competitor, my colleague in the department? Am I getting the same, more, or less than they? How do I determine whether I am getting short shrift, the thin end of the wedge, shafted, and should I get more?

The evaluation is often based on some increment of size, and how it could be augmented. It is remarkable how often when I meet a colleague, and the initial 'hello-how do' has been completed, the conversation turns to some measurement of success or, better stated, excess. The questions start: "How many people do you have in your lab now?", or more specifically, "How many graduate students/postdocs do you have?", or "How much space do you have?", and if you just moved, "How much did you get in start-up?", or "What sort of endowment did you get", and then, more details, "Does your group have access to free facilities for arrays, microscopes etc.?" (emphasis on 'free'), "How big is your graduate program?" and "How many faculty in your department?" In all of these cases, the larger the number in response to the question, the better you

look in relation to others. Or so it is thought.

I find that meeting groups of students most often engenders these types of questions. Perhaps it is because they are looking for something to say, or because this is something that they think is either important or will in some way flatter the investigator. I recall that during a trip to give a talk as part of a graduate student invited symposium, the speakers spent one day going around in pairs meeting with groups of students. At each meeting, we were asked the same set of questions by the students regarding the size of our lab, group, budget, etc., maybe by way of an introduction, before we turned to what they were doing. The person with whom I was paired got fed up with this same set of questions. When we entered a room to meet with the next set of students, he sat down and announced to them, unasked, the size, shape, organization and finances of his lab. He then, unasked by me in this case, offered up the same set of statistics for my lab! As you might imagine, this put quite a dampener on the discussion.

In addition to these cases in which numerical superiority is viewed as good, there are a few cases in which a small number is best. For example, a small number appears to be good in response

to the following questions: “How many lectures do you give, or how much teaching do you do?”, “How much administrative time do you have to put in?”, “How many grant applications did you get to review?”, “How many faculty meetings do you have a year?” and “How many days do your graduate students and postdocs take off for holidays?” In all cases the smaller the number the better!

But, of course, this is all nonsense, right? The number of graduate students and postdocs in a lab is inversely proportional to the amount of individual attention they get from the head of the lab. Although roomy, large areas of lab are esthetically nice, they can appear to be less interactive than when everyone is crammed in together and you have to crawl over someone else to get to a piece of equipment. Admittedly, this was spoken by a lab head rather than some one in the trenches who has to put up with the very close proximity of a smelly

lab mate. The same goes for the budget of a lab. Budget size should fit the lab (and the work – animals are very expensive), but I bet that most of you run labs in an inefficient way, with little or no oversight of what is spent. Generally, the larger the lab, the more doubtful it is that someone will take the time to find out whether there are already three vials of ‘X’ or 100g of ‘Y’ in the lab that they could use instead of buying another one. Similarly, start-up packages should reflect the needs of the in-coming faculty rather than be adjusted to some sort of inflated amount for a player transfer between clubs. And, the same is true for the questions seeking a small number. Teaching and lecturing are good. Well, OK, up to a certain number! And, helping out with administration duties means that someone else does not have to put in as much time. So, in those cases, the larger number in response to the question is good. Oh, and graduate students and postdocs should take off as much time as they want. They should

know that how much they put into the project will, in most cases, equal what they get out of it (and hence the more time spent away from the work, the less will be done).

Let’s throw away the league tables of worth in science. So what if you only have 3 graduate students and a postdoc. Hopefully, you have the money to fund them fully so that they can do their experiments, and you should have the time to look after them and make sure that they are on track and focused. Who cares if you have a floor of labs in a building – I hope that you can justify it in the context of ‘bang-for-the-buck’ (JCS 113: 751-752). And, shame on you for getting away with as little teaching and administrative work as possible. Do your share, even if it means doing more.

Size really shouldn’t matter.

Caveman

Letters

JCS welcomes correspondence provoked by articles in all sections of the journal. Responses to articles in the Sticky Wicket section should be sent directly to Caveman (email: caveman@biologists.com). Correspondence relating to Research Articles, Commentaries and Cell Science at a Glance should be addressed to the Executive Editor and sent to

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