The G. S. A. NEWSLETTER

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Notes from the GSA: Looking Ahead into 2002

By Aurora Kerscher

The academic year is only midway through (hang-in there 1st years), but 2001 has come to a close. September 11th, the anthrax scare, and the war against terrorism were defining moments for all of us. But looking back on the scientific achievements –2001 shaped up to be a banner year. Remember the big sequencing race between Craig Venter of Celera and Francis Collins of the Human Genome Project? Or how the phrase "stem cells" broke into the mainstream and NPR couldn't stop talking about them? And Proteomics and small RNAs were the cat's meow of 2001. Closer to home, Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions also had a big year. Johns Hopkins University celebrated its 125th anniversary, the Hospital was named number 1 in the country for the eleventh year in a row, and the tragic death of a volunteer in a Hopkins research study stunned the medical community. Hopkins graduate students were also impacted in 2001 – we welcomed Peter Maloney as the new Associate Dean for Graduate Studies and the Professional Development Office (PDO) directed by Wendy Sanders got off to a strong start.

Looking ahead into 2002 –

Continued on page 2

Taxing Questions

By Joanna Zarach

Filing taxes should not be as complicated as it seems. Tax rules that pertain to most graduate students are actually pretty simple, but whenever you look at the long form, you may wonder if you are missing anything. Here are a few pointers to make your filing easier.

As graduate students, we are in a poorly defined class of taxpayers. We are obligated to volunteer the amount of stipend that the University pays us, even though the IRS gets no record of it. Although we fulfill the requirements of our graduate studies by toiling away in lab, we have no earned income, since we are not getting paid for services. Practically speaking, what effect does that have on your taxes? Several credits and tax deductions are based on the amount of earned income, such as the earned income credit and IRA deductions, for which you are not eligible unless you have a job on the side or a spouse with earned income.

What about education credits? If you have qualified expenses, which are tuition and required textbooks, there is a formula that lets you deduct part of it from your tax bill. Graduate students receive tuition vouchers and after 2nd year are not buying too many books, and the credit only covers a percentage of

Continued on page 2

Upcoming GSA Meeting: February 19th

*** 517 PCTB ***

Note: Meeting day and time have changed to the **3rd** Tuesday of each month at **3 pm**

Upcoming GSA Events

Pioneers in Science and Alicia Sholwalter-Reynolds Lectureships

Australian Wine Tasting
April 18th, 2002

Sixth Annual GSA Poster-Session
End of April

Serve-A-Thon
April 20, 2002
Contact Marina at mslee@jhmi.edu for more information.

GSA from page 1.....

the Graduate Student Association has planned many exciting events for Hopkins students. We started the year off with a successful Happy Hour in the Greenhouse to ease all of us back into lab from the holiday break. (Many thanks to Dan Cohen, Nurjana Bachman, and Joanna Zarach for their help.) The GSA has also invited several distinguished scientists to Johns Hopkins this spring to speak about their research and give students a chance to interact with them in more social settings. Steven McKnight, Chairman of Biochemistry at UT Southwestern Medical Center will be our 1st Pioneers of Science Lecturer of 2002. Dr. McKnight first postulated the existence of the leucine zipper in 1987 and has spent his career trying to understand how genes are switched on and off in cells by transcriptional control. Connie Schmaljohn, Chief of the Department of Molecular Virology at the United States Army Medical Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) in Fort Detrick, will speak at the Alicia Showalter Reynolds Memorial Lecture. Dr. Schmaljohn and her group are interested in developing DNA vaccines for infectious diseases caused by Hanta and Ebola viruses and tick-borne encephalitis. More information about these lectures will be announced in the next few weeks.

The Graduate Student Association has worked hard to organize numerous activities that span all aspects of student life. In January, Daphne Monie, Valerie Deleon, Jason Mussell, and Dan Cohen hosted a GSA Forum on Student Health. This was a great opportunity for all of us to understand the confusing process of medical coverage, how to pay bills, and get referrals. The 6th Annual GSA Poster Session/ Happy Hour scheduled for April will allow students to present their research and compete for cash prizes while sipping a cold beer. Various social events are also in the works such as an Australian Wine Tasting that will take place on April 18th. Forgot to make a New Year's resolution? How about getting more involved in the Graduate Student Association. Drop in at a GSA meeting – every third Tuesday of the month at 3pm in PCTB 517 - and share some of your ideas on how to improve graduate student life. If you would like to participate in any of the upcoming events send us an email at: gsa-g@jhmi.edu.

Have a great New Year!

Taxes from page 1.....

expenses. However, you can simply subtract the cost of books and course fees from your stipend before you report the amount on form 1040. For example, if your total stipend was $19,300 and you spend $175 on books during the year 2001, you only report the stipend above and beyond course expenses, which would be $19,125. Other useful tidbits include:

- Student loan interest and moving expenses are deductible regardless of whether you itemize or take the standard deduction
- If you pay estimated taxes during the year, you cannot file form 1040EZ or MD503.
- If you have children, there are child credits and child care credits
- If you have investments, you may have to file additional schedules based on the type and the amount of income

Lastly, what about those tax-deductible charitable contributions and medical and dental expenses you hear about. If you think you may be able to reduce your tax bill by itemizing, think again. Unless you have a mortgage, high state and local tax bills, mountains of medical expenses, or have turned your entire stipend over to a charity, you probably don't qualify. But if you do, keep in mind that medical and dental expenses are only deductible to the extent that they exceed 7.5% of your AGI (adjusted gross income). For the current stipend level, that would translate to out of pocket expenses in excess of $1500. Also, miscellaneous expenses have to exceed 2% of your AGI, before you can take the deduction, which means anything in excess of $400. Charitable contributions are fully deductible (There is a ceiling). These are just a couple of general tax facts. One can spend an eternity understanding the tax code, which is why many people pay someone else to prepare their taxes. Even if you have a tax preparer it is a good idea to at least understand some basic tax concepts when making financial decisions, such as buying a house or investing money.

To become a better-informed taxpayer, besides reading that 1040 booklet that you've gotten in the mail, you should get Publication 17 from the IRS. This publication titled "Your Federal Income Tax (for individuals)" should answer most questions you may have about the tax return. You can call 1-800-TAX-FORM or access the IRS website at www.irs.gov. And for Maryland tax information take a look at individuals.marylandtaxes.com. Finally, if you have any tax questions, you can email mytaxes1040@yahoo.com.

Career Retrospective

By Derek Jantz

Aging professors call it "a-prof-tosis." It's the point in one's professional career where scientific seminars come to be dominated by pictures of the grandkids rather than slides of data or anything else that the audience is likely to be interested in. There is, to my knowledge, no grad student equivalent. Whether this is because we have less of a career to reflect on or because we simply fear reflection I cannot be sure. I suspect, however, that it is the latter. To look back on one's graduate career is to acknowledge the fact that most of our projects could be accurately titled *An Egregious Injustice Inflicted upon American Taxpayers.* Ever the adventurous type, however, I shall attempt to look back over the last five years of my life—to risk a glance into that academic black-hole that we all know as graduate school.

YEAR 1:

I was idealistic. I'm the first to admit that. I had every expectation of curing at least one of the big three (AIDS, cancer, heart disease) prior to completing my first year coursework. Years 2 and 3 were to be spent on a beach in Greece drinking whatever Greek beach-goers drink and outlining a strategy to market my new miracle drug as a series of fruit-flavored lip-balms. I'm not entirely sure how I hoped to generate this miracle drug given that my understanding of AIDS, cancer, and heart disease at that point was roughly on par with my understanding of God and the infield-fly rule. Having grown up on the ski slopes, however, I knew lip-balm like the back of my hand.

I spent approximately one-half of my time learning science and spent the other half complaining about the uselessness of what I had just been taught. It wasn't that I mistrusted my teachers. Six seasons of the X-Files had simply left me with the opinion that a significant percentage of scientific knowledge was based on lies propagated by underground government agencies bent on the destruction of the human race. My resulting tendency to second-guess professors was clearly reflected on most of my exam scores. Though it failed to yield even partial credit, I believe that *Disproving the Existence of Carbon-Based Life*, as submitted in the short-answer section of my first biochemistry exam, was my finest piece of writing to date.

Of course, class-work was never my strong suit. Prior to coming Hopkins, I was told that the most difficult aspect of starting grad school courses is making the transition from being a straight-A student to merely being average. Having never been a straight-A student, I was not burdened by such concerns and found the most difficult aspect of grad school courses to be the ritualistic floggings dolled out every morning before class.

I never let coursework hold me back, though. I was confident. I was ambitious. I had everything required to be a great scientist with the exception of competence. This deficiency, however, was cleverly disguised by my total lack of work ethic—it's difficult to be shown incompetent when one never shows up for work. To this end, my lab rotations could aptly be described as "brief intervals of semi-consciousness interspersed between morning lecture and lunch. I avoided work at all costs, often holding out for months under the pretense that I was working out a more lucrative contract with another lab. What my classmates called "laziness," I called "my clinical (if self-diagnosed) fear of productivity." The mere thought of lab work would regularly send my big toe into so severe a state of twitching that I would be forced to return home and soak away the afternoon in a warm bubble bath.

YEAR 2:

My second year began with a series of setbacks. My treatises *Six Months Without Arginine* and *The Spontaneous Generation of Life from My Roommate's Underwear Drawer*, though forward thinking, were not well received professionally. In October, the Guggenheim museum refused my submission of a piece entitled "Rotation Poster" stating that, "while Mr. Jantz achieves new heights of color and originality in a scientific poster, the bar wasn't that high to begin with".

In the spring, I was forced to accept the fact that my advisor really *wasn't* kidding when he refused to hire me a technician. Faced with the very real possibility that my Ph.D. might take longer than 3 years, I was forced to bite the bullet and find my lab bench, a process made more difficult by the fact that my twitching toe impaired my ability to turn to the right. At length however, I was able arrange all of the lab's equipment in such away that I could easily access all of it by walking in a series of concentric circles of ever-increasing diameter. The new arrangement was, of course, not well received by my coworkers. Their complaints were effectively silenced, however, by the presentation of my self-penned work *Biohazard Boxes: New Approaches in the Disposal of Human Remains* at department Journal Club.

I can only assume that, at some point my second year, I passed my oral qualifying exam. I know this to be true only because my program requires the completion of an oral exam in the second year and I am still a member of the program. To be honest, though, I cannot remember the event itself. My therapist tells me that we rarely suppress *positive* memories, which doesn't bode well for my performance.

On a positive note, it was near the end of my second year that I discovered that, by dramatically lessening all that was expected of me, I was able to consistently achieve my objectives and thereby quash my continued feelings of inadequacy. I began to take great pride in activities that lesser scientists considered insignificant. It is difficult to explain to the lay reader the sense of euphoria that can accompany a well-ejected pipette tip—an event that regularly drove me to such heights of elation that I was forced to spend the remainder of the day soaking in a warm bubble bath in reflective commemoration.

Next time— Episode 2: Attack of the Clontech Vendors (years 3 and 4)

Community Outreach

By Derek Jantz

Every spring, my department takes an active role in "bring your child to work day." The labs around the department all set up fun demonstrations intended to be mildly educational while getting the kids excited about science. We show them how to separate different colors of ink by paper chromatography. We show them how to run a gel with brightly colored protein markers. I demonstrate column chromatography by separating different sizes of gumballs on a huge column filled with wiffle-balls. Every year, I finish the day with half as many gumballs as I started with. What this generally means to the kids: a day off from school and as many gumballs as they can scavenge off the floor while I'm not looking. What this generally means for me: a day off from lab and a reaffirmation of my vow not to have kids *until I'm damn good and ready*.

But that changed last year.

Last year, our brightly colored and occasionally fruit-flavored lab demonstration became part of a med-school wide community outreach program. That March, the office of community relations brought in 90 inner-city kids from a local elementary school—mostly 4th and 5th graders—to take part in the first annual "bring *somebody else's* child to work day." The kids spent the morning being taken from lab to lab to play with everything from computers to cabbage juice. We then gave them lunch and let them sit through a talk by a faculty member whose injudicious use of the word "breast" drove the audience to uncontrolled fits of giggling too many times for me to count.

Before the event, I was as skeptical as anybody. I'm embarrassed to say that I threw around a fair number of handgun and drug-lab jokes. Several people went so far as to lock up their computers and other valuables for the day. We were not expecting the day to be even remotely similar to our previous BYCTW days. And it wasn't. These kids actually *learned* something. They were well behaved. They were attentive. They were genuinely interested in everything that was going on around them. At first, I thought their teachers must have put the fear of God into them—made it clear that any misbehavior was grounds for the most severe form of punishment the laws of physics would allow. Five minutes into my demonstration, however, I came to the startling realization that these kids were paying attention because *nobody had **ever** done anything like this for them before.*

For the faculty kids, we were entertainment. We were just another field trip to the zoo. For the inner-city kids, however, coming to Hopkins for the day was a *reward* for having performed well in their classes. They had been looking forward to it for months and many of them proudly displayed the new clothes their parents had bought them for the event.

Spending the morning with those kids opened my eyes to just how different things really are here. Imagine being a fifth-grader without recess. Or gym class. Or a computer lab. There *is* a community swimming pool, it's just full of glass and they don't keep any water in it. Most of them came from broken homes and their teachers were clearly much more interested in maintaining order than teaching. These kids were looking for somebody...*anybody*...to take a genuine interest in them. We did, and they responded.

It took a lot of people to make that day happen. About 20 labs participated and most of the demonstrations were given by grad students. This year, we're doing it again and we need your help. On March 28th, we're inviting another 90 5th graders from Tench Tilghman Elementary (a stone's throw from the medical campus.) We need grad students to take small groups of kids around to the different labs. Also, new this year, we're going to put on a "show" for them after the lab demos are over to really give them a good idea of what goes on here at Hopkins (i.e. there will be a lot of lasers and explosives.) If you're interested in participating, please write me at djantz@jhmi.edu. Alternatively, if your lab is in the main basic science complex and you would like to give a lab workshop, please write Barbara Amann at barbara@groucho.med.jhmi.edu.

This was one of the more rewarding experiences of my life, and all I did was separate gumballs (and I still finished the day with half as many as I started.)

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Submissions for the next issue will be due **March 22, 2002**