Conference Report

Cutting-edge Science and Coffee: Auditory System Gordon Research Conference and Seminar 2012 Report

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ABSTRACT

At the third Gordon Research Conference and Gordon Research Seminar on the Auditory System (2012), investigators from all career stages reported on emerging research in a broad range of sub-fields. A distinguishing feature of these conferences is their attention to junior investigators, and their experience is the focus of this conference report.

Keywords: conference report, GRS, GRC

CONFERENCE REPORT

A fundamental challenge for students in the hearing sciences is how to connect with senior researchers and effectively become integrated in the field. Large meetings provide opportunities, but principal investigators (PIs) can be difficult to approach and participation in research symposia can be intimidating for new trainees. Small meetings are often by invitation only and tend to exclude students. Gordon Research Conferences provide the best of both big and small venues, offering the access and leisurely discussion that lasts a career.

The 2012 Gordon Research Conference (GRC) on the Auditory System took place July 8–12 at picturesque Bates College in Lewiston Maine. It was preceded by the Gordon Research Seminar (GRS) on the Auditory System, a unique meeting reserved for postdocs and graduate

students, on July 7–8. Roughly 130 scientists attended the GRC, 46 of whom were trainees who had just attended the GRS, making this a large meeting by GRS/GRC standards. The topics were selected from a variety of auditory sub-fields covering peripheral mechanics to cortical mechanisms and animal development to human psychoacoustics. For example, the opening session featured talks by Peter Narins (UCLA) on ultrasonic hearing in frogs, Anthony Ricci (Stanford University) on the biophysics of the mechanotransducer channel, and Andrew Oxenham (University of Minnesota) on pitch perception. Sessions on the following days included auditory development, plasticity and processing, and regeneration. Most sessions included multiple levels of understanding, from the molecular to network connectivity to perception, helping the audience integrate studies into a holistic understanding of the auditory system. New this year was an exciting session on multisensory integration featuring talks by Yale Cohen (University of Pennsylvania) and Dora Angelaki (Baylor College of Medicine). Detailed descriptions of the presentations are not described, in adherence with the non-dissemination policy of the Gordon Research Conferences' organizing body. The policy is designed to encourage and protect the presentation of cutting-edge, unpublished research.

As the co-chairs of the 2012 GRS, we write this conference report from the trainees' perspective, including quoted feedback from official (anonymous) comment forms and from informal email communications. From the standpoint of a trainee, there are many benefits of this small, more personal meeting, relative to larger conferences such as SFN and even the ARO Midwinter Meeting. As many of us are familiar with the "one meeting per year" policy of many PIs, the decision to attend the GRC must satisfy our scientific enthusiasm as well as long-term career goals. Because many in the

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auditory and related fields are not accustomed to the Gordon Research Conferences format, we hope to provide information that will be of use to trainees and PIs as they consider which meeting best satisfies the combined needs of training and networking.

GRS

The conference is formatted so that trainees arrive the day before the PIs and participate in the trainee-only GRS. For the GRS, graduate students and postdocs chair the event, lead all sessions, and give all talks. Several senior faculty are on hand to act as mentors. This year, Dr. Thanos Tzounopoulos (assistant professor, University of Pittsburgh) was invited as the keynote speaker, serving as a role model for the trainees. Dr. Janet Cyr also presented a short session on funding opportunities at the NIDCD, and trainees had plenty of opportunities to interact personally with Janet and receive advice on funding issues. One trainee remarked that, "Talking with the Program Officer [Janet Cyr] really helped me to carve out how I want to approach the next few steps of my career path."

GRS attendees were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the meeting format and opportunities for scientific exchange, networking, and confidence building that are all critical to the development of a young scientist. In the words of one, "The GRS helps you to talk through ideas with others in a less intimidating setting and helps sharpen the way you are articulating your thoughts."

GRC

After the GRS, the trainees had a few hours off to play soccer, hike, or nap under a tree before the PI bus arrived and the GRC began. The GRC was a larger extension of the GRS, with cutting-edge talks presented by either PIs or trainees. Poster sessions began during the later hours of each afternoon and resumed late into the night after the evening talks. These events provided a casual (but often lively) opportunity for interaction. The small size of the GRC allows trainees and more senior researchers alike to network and exchange scientific ideas with researchers outside their own narrow field. The intimate nature of the conference also promotes cooperation and collaboration rather than competition. As one attendee noted, "I think that this is a good forum for discussion of conflicting data between different labs. I am aware of at least two groups presenting potentially controversial data, but everything remained civil."

The smaller scale and format of the GRS/GRC might be thought to have some limitations such as the omission of cutting-edge ideas and techniques or diversity of approaches. In fact, the selection of invited speakers is

responsive to this need, and a trainee's opportunity to network with key scientists they might be interested in, either as a postdoc mentor or a potential faculty colleague, is exceptional. Moreover, representatives from funding sources were present at the GRS/GRC, such that one-on-one guidance could be sought out during the entire meeting. In particular, Dr. Janet Cyr (NIDCD Program Officer) offered a wealth of information about the grant and career process. Although one can identify professional services that must be found elsewhere (e.g., career options outside of academia), our experience suggests that the many opportunities to make direct contact at the GRS/GRC far outweigh the few limitations.

The spirit of the GRC is reflected in the democratic nature of the business meeting towards the end of the conference. Both faculty and trainees vote to elect new co-chairs for the GRC/GRS. The co-chairs are then promoted to serve as the chairs of the next meeting, thus assuring continuity. The meeting participants also provide feedback and suggest improvements for the subsequent meetings.

Several respondents stated that the GRS/GRC was the best meeting of the year, combining new and exciting science, unparalleled networking opportunities, and lots of fun. The GRS/GRC experience is summarized best here, "Whatever your techniques of choice or area of the auditory system, you will find something that will fascinate and stimulate your curiosity at these meetings."

The next Auditory System GRS and GRC will take place in the summer of 2014. Exact dates and location are still under discussion. Please contact the GRS/GRC organizers for more information or check the GRC website.

2014 GRC Chair: Ruth Anne Eatock, PhD (eatock@meei.harvard.edu)

2014 GRC Vice Chair: Stephen Lomber, PhD (steve.lomber@uwo.ca)

2014 GRS Chair: Sean Slee, PhD (slee@ohsu.edu)

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Gordon Research Conference Website: www.grc.org

Auditory Gordon Research Conference 2012 Program: www.grc.org/programs.aspx?year=2012&program=auditory

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