

Fellows Symposium, Celebrating 30 Years of “Wild Ideas”

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“If there’s one thing that characterizes all Fellows, it’s that they’re bold and unafraid.”
—Whitehead Member, Hazel Sive

The first time Mark Daly visited Whitehead Institute he was only a college student. Now head of the Genetics Unit at Massachusetts General Hospital and Co-Director of the Medical and Population Genetics program at the Broad Institute, and with numerous contributions to medical research to his name, Daly says in no uncertain terms that the Whitehead Fellows Program was truly his launching pad.

It’s a sentiment that was shared by the 29 other former Fellows who returned to Cambridge last October to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the renowned Whitehead Fellows Program, which gives

exceptional PhD recipients a lab in which to pursue their own research agendas. Over the course of a two-day symposium, former and current Fellows discussed their research and the impact Whitehead Institute has had on their careers.

“There is nothing in my life that hasn’t been touched by Whitehead,” said Daly, who has been affiliated with the Institute in some capacity for 19 years. A Fellow from 2000-2005, Daly expressed profound gratitude for the program. “Everything about my life is more rewarding because of this place.”

The former Fellows reminisced about late nights in the lab and nail-biting analyses. They spoke of unexpected findings, serendipitous results, and “aha” moments. They also spoke of shattered conventions, many of which inspired future studies and, more often than not, became foundations for their careers. Trey Ideker, Chief of Genetics at the University of California San Diego, described how systems biologists are trying to go from genotype to phenotype using knowledge of complex networks. At Whitehead Institute, Ideker showed that networks are not static but rather dynamic and differential. Even more, his current work now suggests that networks are not modular, but hierarchical and multi-scale.

“You have a ready environment in which creativity can blossom,” said Sebastian Lourido, an infectious disease researcher who arrived as a Whitehead Fellow last year. “Because of the collaborative atmosphere, and everyone’s readiness to assist new investigators, you can really hit the ground running.”

Lessons learned were shared, too, many of which are core values on which Whitehead Institute was founded. One after another, the Fellows converged on the legendary advice of Whitehead Institute Founder Jack Whitehead. “Jack told us to be arrogant,” said Ernest Fraenkel, an Associate Professor in the Department of Biological Engineering at MIT, who admitted his current work—making sense of biological data by creating maps of intracellular interactions—is nothing short of arrogant.

Of course by arrogance, Jack Whitehead meant that solving the most challenging biological problems doesn’t come from conventional thinking, but from ambitious, out-of-the-box, wild ideas—ones that shake things up, make people mad even.

“When I introduced an idea to my mentors at Whitehead,” David Schneider said, “they weren’t happy unless it was crazy. I still carry this with me.” An Associate Professor in the Microbiology and Immunology Department at Stanford University, Schneider says, “Now when I’m in a meeting, I feel like I haven’t succeeded unless people are

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really worked up.”

Everyone spoke of the great privilege it was to be a part of the Fellows Program. Bruce Tidor, Professor of Bioengineering and Computer Science at MIT, said, “Whenever I think about my career—who I am and how I represent myself—I think back to the support I was given as a Fellow, and the opportunity I had to pursue my own projects. There was this model of excellence that’s hard to replicate, and it’s shaped how I run my lab today.”

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