

An acute need for more endowed chairs: IBBS leaders would like to see a sizable increase in the number of endowed professorships in the basic sciences

June 2009--On June 12, at a ceremony in the grand East Reading Room of the Welch Library, [Peter Devreotes](#) was installed as the first Isaac Morris Hay and Lucille Elizabeth Hay Professor in Embryology. The occasion celebrated the receipt of one of academia's highest honors and oldest traditions.

Yet it was an event that occurs far too rarely in Hopkins basic science departments, says IBBS director Steve Desiderio. Only four of the approximately 120 faculty positions at IBBS are endowed professorships, a small minority of the roughly 175 endowed professorships, deanships and directorships that the school of medicine has overall.

Desiderio and other faculty members and development officers would like to improve that record. "We have been doing some hard research on where the prospective donors might be for professorships," says Elizabeth McMahon, IBBS director of development. "And we are just beginning to make the case for professorships to be a top priority in the new campaign."

An endowed professorship is a highly valued asset for the faculty member, as well as that professor's department and university. The tradition dates at least as far back as 176, when Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius endowed chairs for the schools of philosophy in Athens. The practice was adapted to the modern university system in 1502, when endowed chairs were established at Cambridge and Oxford, and King Henry VIII created endowed professorships in basic science and medicine in 1546. Universities and philanthropists have continued to endow chairs to support the research, teaching and service of the most distinguished faculty.

From a practical standpoint, "an endowment is a guaranteed stream of support, which can balance out the ups and downs of research funding," says McMahon. "It's also a way to retain the very best and recruit the very best."

[Phil Cole](#) can attest to that point of view. In 1999, he left Rockefeller University, where he held a financially well-supported faculty position, to accept a post at Hopkins as director of pharmacology. He also became the E.K. Marshall and Thomas H. Maren Professor, a professorship designed to support a faculty member who, besides carrying out a strong research program, would be active in teaching and training graduate and medical students.

"It wasn't the only factor for my accepting the position," says Cole. "But it was reassuring to know that it was very prestigious and valued."

"It's a major attraction, frankly," says IBBS board member [Peter Agre](#), who is a University

Professor of Molecular Microbiology in the [Bloomberg School of Public Health](#). “It’s something that I think Johns Hopkins should look to remedy. I think we lose people because we don’t have more of them.”

For Devreotes, endowed professorships provide other, less tangible benefits. “They free people to do more creative research,” he says. “As a scientist, you spend a great deal of your time writing grants, and what you write can’t be too out of the box.”

With the financial cushion of an endowment, however, a scientist can spend more time actually doing science, including conducting studies that are important but might not be in a research category that is garnering funding at the moment.

As chairman of [cell biology](#), Devreotes plans to apply funds from the new professorship to support the work of the department overall. With the endowment, Cell Biology has already established a research grant program for graduate students, which will begin funding two students this July.

Given the value of endowed chairs, why does IBBS have so few? It’s not for lack of talent, notes Desiderio. Dozens of faculty members merit the honor.

Part of the answer has to do with the nature of the “donor pipeline,” says McMahon. While clinical departments generally have a steady stream of “grateful patients” and their families who want to give thanks for medical care received, basic science departments do not attract the same sort of donors.

Instead, many of the philanthropists who donate to IBBS are alumni or former faculty members.

Elizabeth Hay is one example. She earned her medical degree from Hopkins and served on the faculty in Cell Biology. Although Hay later accepted a position at Harvard Medical School, where she held an endowed professorship, she chose Hopkins to be the home of the recent endowed professorship, which honors her parents.

These donors are sympathetic, says McMahon. “When I go talk to alums, there is a deep love and pride for Hopkins,” she says. “To a person, they want to give back. Anyone in academic medicine understands. So it’s not a matter of convincing the unconvinced. But the reality is that most of our graduates don’t have the capability to make a \$2.5 million gift.”

McMahon believes that IBBS must now reach beyond its alumni to find prospective donors for future endowed professorships. Part of that process may involve communicating how basic science can translate into medical therapy.

“If someone is interested in cancer research,” says McMahon, “we can explain how research in the [Department of Molecular Biology and Genetics](#) might uncover a fundamental mechanism that could relate to cancer.”

But Desiderio believes there may also be potential donors who simply like science, who

appreciate the sense of wonder that scientific quests and discoveries engender. Many of those science fans might be willing to endow a professorship; it's simply a matter of lighting that spark. "You can make a group feel passionately about cell biology," says Desiderio.

Whatever the strategy, adds McMahon, raising funds to endow at least two chairs in each department should be a priority of the next campaign. Accomplishing that goal would require raising between \$90 million and \$108 million, she says. (IBBS has already launched a \$1.5 million fundraising goal to support first-year training of every graduate student.)

"Endowed professorships do help recruit and retain faculty," says Desiderio. "But the real reason they're important is that they're a tangible manifestation of the value the institution places on a particular field."

—Melissa Hendricks