Greetings!

As my term as interim Department Chair ends, I reflect on the past year’s achievements and look forward to the exciting times that lay ahead. I am thrilled to announce that the external search for a Department Chair was successful, and we will welcome Professor Dave Thirumalai to our department in January. Professor Thirumalai is currently a University Distinguished Professor and founding director of the biophysics program at the University of Maryland. In addition to assuming the responsibilities of Department Chair, he will be appointed as the Robert A. Welch Chair in Chemistry. Professor Thirumalai brings both strong leadership experience and a prestigious research program in the general area of computations and bio-physics to Texas. Please look for his inaugural welcome letter in the Spring 2016 edition of Chemical Compositions.

We had a very successful year for recruiting junior faculty last year, and I am pleased to announce that Livia Eberlin and Carlos Baiz have joined the Department as assistant professors. Each was the top candidate in their field, and they are exciting additions to our department. Meanwhile, the 2015 recruiting season is in full swing, and I look forward to meeting the next group of prospective, talented young faculty.

I’m sorry to say that Keith Stevenson left the University in August for the Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology (Skoltech) in Russia. In addition to holding a faculty position, Stevenson has been named as Provost ad interim and also Director of the Skoltech Center for Electrochemical Energy Storage. Though we regret his departure, I wish him the best and congratulate him on his new opportunity.

Over the summer, Welch Hall ’78 wing renovation funds were approved by the Texas Legislature. With some of the largest classrooms on campus, Welch Hall serves students from across the University as well as houses many chemistry and biochemistry research labs and core facilities. The importance of state-of-art teaching and research labs, modern seminar rooms, and accessible collaborative space for the Department of Chemistry and all UT students emphasizes the significance of this important renovation. Work should begin in Fall 2016, following the completion of the ’29 west wing renovations, in progress now. The Welch Hall fundraising campaign is currently underway to meet total funding needs.

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Student and Alumni News

Sarah Wong Attends SACNAS Summer Leadership Institute (SLI)

In July, Sarah Wong participated in a leadership program as a part of the Postdoctoral Fellow cohort at the SACNAS Summer Leadership Institute (SLI) led by the Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics & Native Americans in Science (SACNAS) and American Association for Advancement of Science (AAAS). The institute is an intensive course featuring small group exercises, leadership development planning, networking opportunities, and extensive community building among selected participants.

The institute, held in Washington DC, sought to train underrepresented minority STEM leaders to serve, strengthen, and unify communities at the local and national level. Participants learned tools to lead institutional transformation and help build a critical mass of STEM professionals and leaders from underrepresented communities. Since 2009, the SACNAS SLI has trained a cohort of 30 PhD-level scientists each year, making it the largest cohort of emerging STEM leaders of color in the country.

Dr. Wong is a post-doctoral fellow supported by a NIH-funded training program directed by Dr. Jenny Brodbelt. The training program, Collaborative Opportunities for Research Educators (CORE), aims to train a diverse group of scientists to excel in research and teaching careers in academia. Dr. Wong joined the program in January 2015 and undertakes research in the laboratory of Dr. Kevin Dalby, Department of Medicinal Chemistry, College of Pharmacy.

Stellar Student Spotlight: Tyler King

Tyler is a senior and an Undergraduate Research Assistant in the Jones Group

What influenced your decision to attend the University of Texas and study chemistry?

I knew I bled burnt orange from a young age, so UT was and has always been my first choice. I studied chemistry through a very fortunate admissions decision.

I originally applied to study chemical engineering first and chemistry second and was placed into chemistry, which was undoubtedly the best thing that could have happened.

The College of Natural Sciences and the Department of Chemistry feel like home. My interest in chemistry was initiated by a high school teacher, Ms. Kacy Stallman, who allowed me to do little experiments and demonstrations for the class like soaking dollar bills in isopropanol and water and lighting them on fire without burning the dollar bills.

Describe your current research or outreach project:

My current research involves the synthesis and characterization of luminescent lanthanide bioprobes that could potentially replace existing organic bioprobes. The research I do is a mixture of inorganic/organic synthesis, tissue culture, microscopy, and fluorimetry.

What are your plans for the future?

My future plans are to go to graduate school with a focus in bioinorganic chemistry followed by a Post-Doc position and hopefully continuing in academia.

Alumni News

Taylor B. Jones (Ph.D., 1975) passed away on June 6, 2015. Dr. Jones was a professor at The Master’s College in Santa Clarita, California for 29 years and served as chair for both the Science Department and the Mathematics Department. http://www.masters.edu/the-life-and-legacy-of-dr-taylor-b-jones-1948-2015/

Chair’s Letter, continued

On a personal note, I am looking forward to February 2016, when I will celebrate my 70th birthday with a symposium organized by group alumni and current students. The weekend-long event will be part scientific conference and part Martin Research Group homecoming. For more information, please visit the symposium website.

In closing, I am appreciative of this past year and the second opportunity to lead as Chair. Furthermore, I look forward to the very promising future for the Department of Chemistry.

Alumni: Submit your news to chemalum@cm.utexas.edu and your updates will be printed in the next newsletter. Please include your full name and graduation year.
Dave Thirmulai Joins Department as Chair

We are excited to announce that Professor Dave Thirmulai of the University of Maryland College Park has accepted the chairmanship of the Department of Chemistry at UT Austin. Thirmulai will join the Department in January 2016.

Thirmulai received his Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota and was a postdoc at Columbia University. In 1985, he joined the faculty at the University of Maryland and rose through the ranks where he is currently a distinguished university professor and founding director of the biophysics program. Thirmulai’s research is primarily theoretical at the interfaces of chemistry, physics, and biology.

We look forward to his arrival and leadership!

Welcome New Faculty

The Department of Chemistry welcomes two new assistant professors: Carlos Baiz and Livia Eberlin. Baiz is a former postdoc in the Andrei Tokmakoff research group, first at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and later at the University of Chicago. Baiz’s research investigates the structure, dynamics, and self-organization of proteins and lipids in biological membranes.

Eberlin joins the department following a postdoc with Dick Zare at Stanford. Research in the Eberlin group focuses on applying novel mass spectrometry imaging technology to health related research.

Additionally, this semester we welcome new lecturers Tony Campos, Ben Meekins, and Alisha Bohnsack.

Graeme Henkelman Promoted

Congratulations to Graeme Henkelman on his promotion from associate professor to full professor, effective September 1, 2015. The primary focus of the Henkelman group is the development of simulation methodology to study kinetic processes at the atomic scale.

Henkelman also serves as associate chair for the Department.

Alan Cowley Honored at Symposium and

On October 9th and 10th, Professor Emeritus Alan Cowley’s career and contributions were honored during a two-day symposium attended by former colleagues and research group alumni. The scientific lectures covered topics influenced by Cowley’s 54-year career of inorganic chemistry research, including talks by Didier Astruc of the University of Bordeaux and Jerry Atwood of the University of Missouri-Columbia.

On Saturday, symposium participants, members of Cowley’s family, and invited guests attended a banquet at the AT&T Hotel and Conference Center. During the dinner, attendees enjoyed a slideshow of photographs from throughout Cowley’s career and touching remarks were shared by friends and family.

The Alan H. Cowley Endowed Graduate Student Fellowship in Chemistry has been established in tribute to more than 50 years of research, teaching, and service. Funds distributed annually from the Alan H. Cowley Endowed Graduate Student Fellowship in Chemistry will be used to support graduate students studying inorganic chemistry at the University. If you are interested in contributing, please visit the giving page for more information.
Welch Hall Crowd-Funding Opportunity

The College of Natural Sciences has launched a crowd-funding campaign to support Welch Hall renovations, allowing UT Austin community members to invest in facilities and research in new ways.

Welch hosts 10,000+ UT students every day for classes, seminars and labs, and is in need of significant renovations. In June, Governor Abbot signed legislation authorizing construction bonds to pay for part of the project, but the rest will come from donations. The new campaign is looking for more than 1,300 backers who will support the transformation of Welch, making the heart of UT a world-class hub for discovery and hands-on learning. Renovations will include top-of-the-line classrooms, modern research and teaching labs, dedicated Freshman Research Initiative labs and more.

The campaign includes a series of gift levels with examples of their real-world impact. For example, 100 individual gifts at the $5,000-level will transform the Grand Hall into a student-centered community space. Gifts made during the next five years will be recognized on the Catalyst Donor Wall in the updated building. All contributions at every level are very much appreciated.

If you are interested in participating, please visit the campaign’s website.

Monika Hill Retiring

After 31 years of service at the University of Texas at Austin, Accounting and Procurement Manager Monika Hill is retiring at the end of December. Monika joined the Department of Chemistry in 1985 and is not only a fantastic coworker and friendly face, but also an irreplaceable expert and resource for institutional knowledge.

With so much experience and a long career, Monika has witnessed many changes on campus. In particular, technology has improved many aspects of the procurement process. “When I first started working here we did not have any computers and had to manually type everything,” Monika recalls. “When we had to type a purchase order it consisted of nine pages on NCR paper. When you made a mistake you had to use white-out on every page individually.”

It will be difficult for the Department to adjust to Monika’s retirement, as we will miss her expertise, helpfulness, and outgoing, pleasant personality. “I am really going to miss all the wonderful faculty, staff and students that I have worked with through all the years,” says Monika. “I have made many friends and am going to miss everyone. The Department of Chemistry is a really interesting place to work and there is always something going on every day. It seems like there is never a dull moment.”

Monika plans to spend her retirement with her family, including quality time with her husband and spoiling her two grandsons.

A retirement party is planned for December 9, 2015. If you are interested in attending, please contact Jessica Myer at jmyer@cm.utexas.edu.