

Faculty renewal brings *new energy* to McMaster

BY ANDREW VOWLES

Norrie and others say renewal is key to coping with growing waves of students expected through the double cohort and long-term enrolment demands. It's also important for maintaining and strengthening McMaster's reputation as a research-intensive university that fosters interdisciplinary links and encourages creative teaching and learning approaches. Estimating that McMaster now spends up to \$500,000 a year to recruit new faculty, Norrie says the expense is necessary for the University to continue to attract top researchers.

Prof. Mo Elbestawi, dean of the Faculty of Engineering, says he has hired about 50 new faculty since 2000 (balanced against some 15 retirees); his current complement is about 130 and he's aiming for a total of about 140 by 2004. Industry and endowed chairs as well as several appointments under the Canada Research Chairs program have helped to offset salary costs for up to one-third of the appointments. Those programs are critical to help with competing for faculty members, says Elbestawi: "It's a massive competition." But it's one that McMaster appears to be meeting through faculty renewal, for reasons ranging from prospective research collaborations and facilities, to teaching opportunities, to quality of life on and off campus.

Psychology professors Allison Sekuler and Patrick Bennett had found themselves at the proverbial career crossroads. After working together at the University of Toronto for about a decade, the husband-and-wife team had had enough of funding restraints and increasingly scarce resources. They'd been considering a move, even back to the United States, when McMaster came calling, along with the prospect of funding through a Canada Research Chair. They packed up and headed to Hamilton in July 2001. Today, having just finished a lab renovation in the Department of Psychology, including

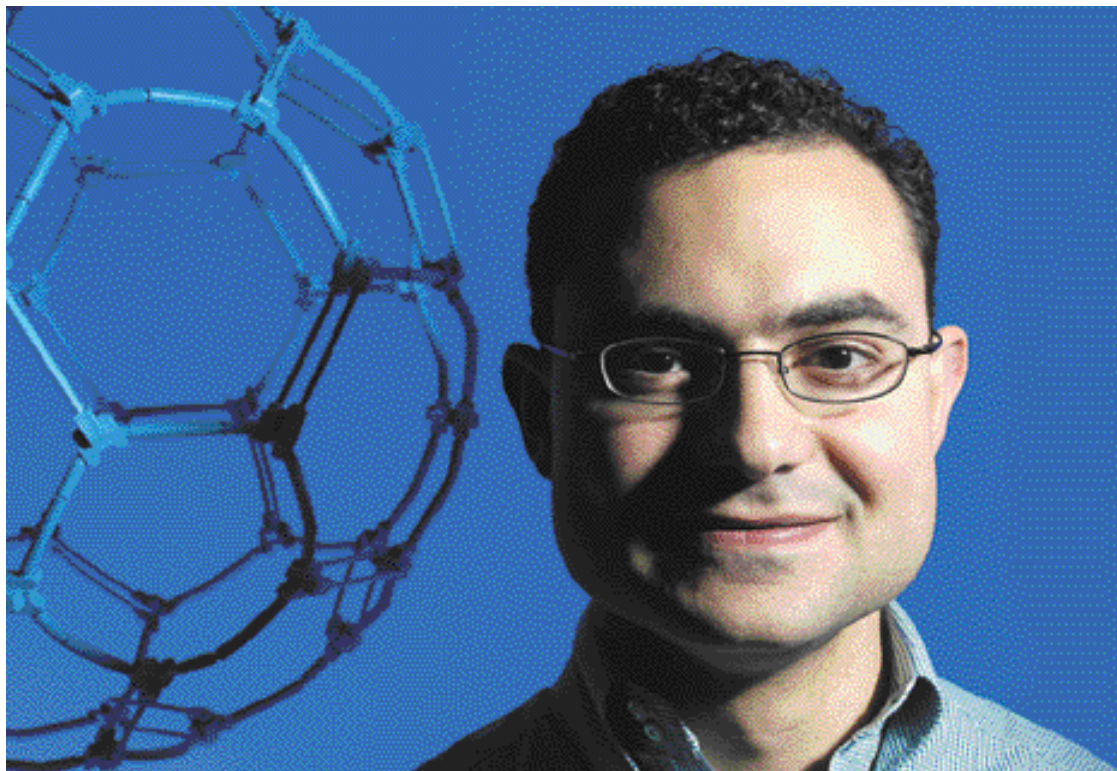
installation of sophisticated eye trackers and scanning machines, they're ensconced in what Sekuler calls "one of the best places in North America" for studying their field of face and object recognition.

Longtime absentees returning to McMaster today might need to borrow some of their equipment to make sense of the changing faces in faculty offices and labs.

New opportunities attracted Prof. Paul Higgs to McMaster's Department of Physics and Astronomy last year. Having arrived after seven years as a faculty member at the University of Manchester, Higgs received a Canada Research Chair in Biophysics. He's particularly enthusiastic about the opportunities

for research collaborations here at McMaster, not just within his department but in various places across campus from biology to biochemistry. Forging those kinds of connections has been relatively easy at McMaster despite recent growth, says Higgs. "I feel that I know people in this department," he says, contrasting the unit with the roughly 100 biologists at Manchester, where "you never really got to know everybody. It was a bit too big."

Professor Lisa Schwartz, Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics (CEB), confesses that, if things had gone according to plan, she'd still be at Glasgow University. She came reluctantly to McMaster, after



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Faculty Renewal continued from page 5

on both sides of the border. For all that Canadians may complain about lack of public funding for art and artists, Platt finds federal support more generous and equitable here than in the States – not to mention relatively fewer artists scrabbling for the pot. “There’s lots more money per artist.” And McMaster specifically is more generous in research funding, she adds, referring to the space and multimedia equipment she has received here. Her second choice had been a position in Buffalo but they’d been looking for someone with robotics expertise.

Across campus, that sentiment is also voiced by chemistry professor Alex Adronov, a Windsor native who returned from California last summer. “I always wanted to come back to Canada because I think the quality of life here is ideal for me.” Having completed his PhD at Berkeley in polymer chemistry, he had been invited to give a seminar at McMaster just as a position came open in the Department of Chemistry. “Just before I came, the job was advertised, so I transformed my visit into an interview,” says Adronov, who completed his undergraduate here at McMaster.

In hindsight, he says choosing a faculty post here was a better move than a chance at a post-doctoral fellowship in Wisconsin. “McMaster is one of Canada’s leading universities especially in materials and polymer science. It was really the right place for me to end up,” he says. Besides receiving research funding through a CFI grant, he was one of four McMaster faculty awarded a Polanyi Prize last year – what Adronov calls “icing on the cake.”

Psychology professor Sekuler says she finds that things can get done faster and easier at McMaster than in her past experiences. She happened to mention an idea she had for a series of public lectures in conversation with a colleague in the University’s research office. “The thing happened so quickly. It went from being an idea to ‘it’s starting in a couple of weeks.’ It’s nice to be in a place where things happen instead of just being talked about.”

Bennett says McMaster offers the promise of further collaborations within his department and with the Brain-Body Institute at St. Joseph’s Healthcare. “The department has a lot more people in areas closer to what I do.” Referring to his Canada Research Chair, he says, “The main attraction for me was the research money that’s associated with it. There’s a quantum leap in the equipment I could get.” One example is his access to equipment for brain scan-



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ning. In Toronto, there would have been a lineup of researchers for such equipment. He says he and Sekuler were approached by other universities but “it never went very far because McMaster had everything in hand.”

“Cautiously optimistic” is how Prof. Alan Harrison, dean of Social Sciences, regards prospects for faculty renewal for his Faculty. Most hiring during the past several years in social sciences has been funded by money provided for specific programs and initiatives, including funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Although the Faculty has replaced faculty resignations, he says renewal has not generally kept pace with retirements, a particular concern for an administrative unit that will see about one-third of its faculty members retire by 2010. A human resources plan (for staff as well as faculty) that he hopes will be accepted early this year calls for strategic appointments to be linked to retirements in order to maintain and enhance areas of teaching and research strength. Assuming that up to 40 faculty will have retired during this decade, Harrison wants to ensure that enough people are hired to at least keep the total complement at about 110 people, which was the

number within the Faculty in 2000 when he began the planning exercise.

For many longtime McMaster faculty, there’s something infectious about the sense of optimism engendered by the renewal efforts during the past few years. Biochemistry professor Brian McCarry, holder of the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Chair in Environment and Health, allows that all of the recent growth has entailed costs, both in recruitment dollars and in legwork but it’s a crucial investment in McMaster’s future. Currently chair of the budget committee, a subgroup of the University Planning Committee, he estimates it takes at least six months from the time a position is advertised until the date of hire – six months worth of visits and interviews involving a range of faculty and administrators. Still, McCarry, who joined McMaster 26 years ago, says the new faces have given the campus a boost. He’s not the only one to feel that way: one of those recent faculty candidates described the “electricity” she felt during her visit to campus. “McMaster’s faculty renewal creates a real sense of energy and excitement about opportunities here,” says McCarry. “It contributes greatly to McMaster’s continued success and helps ensure a very bright future.”

Lecture Overviews continued from page 2

■ May 13: Moving Beyond the Visible Universe: Dark Clouds, Galaxy Collisions and the Origin of Stars

Known internationally for her work on star formation in nearby galaxies, astronomer Christine Wilson will provide a unique view into the cold, dark regions of space where stars form. Wilson will discuss her work on a spectacular collision between two spiral galaxies that has triggered the formation of massive clusters of stars.

■ June 10: Sustainable Communities

From green spaces to buildings using green design principles, find out what would make Hamilton a truly sustainable city. Civil engineering professors Brian Baetz and Cameron Churchill will tell you about their research and what other researchers are proposing to develop liveable communities, and will ask the audience to share their ideas on what would make Hamilton a truly liveable, sustainable community.

■ Special Event! Science in the City for Kids: Saturday March 8 1pm to 3pm

The Junior Fireball Show and McMaster’s Solar Car Racing Team will entertain and inform.

For more information about the lecture series, visit <http://www.mcmaster.ca/research/ScienceintheCity.htm>