

So long...and thanks for all the fish

Todd Boroson

I wanted to write a short note to summarize my thoughts about handing the job of NOAO director over to Dave Silva on July 7. I am very happy that Dave applied for—and accepted—the position. Beyond that, I am pleased that we had an outstanding group of applicants, all of whom clearly thought that the future of NOAO is important, and applied because they wanted to do something meaningful to contribute to this future.

Eighteen months ago, the NSF Senior Review report was about to appear. Many people (both within NOAO and outside) thought that the thrust of the recommendations would be to accelerate our evolution within a fixed budget to focus more and more on the large new national initiatives at the expense of the older facilities. I had certainly come to the conclusion that this was a choice that had to be made. We couldn't do everything, and we had to put our resources into the things that could not (or should not) be done without community participation at the federal level.

However, the Senior Review really laid out the context for a different paradigm—one in which the two separate parts of our mission that represent the two separate extremes of the community are no longer in conflict. After an initial sense of bewilderment, I began to realize that this was really possible. We have a prime opportunity to bring the ground-based optical/infrared (O/IR) community closer together than ever before.

I believe that the following ideas are key to a renewed national structure for ground-based O/IR astronomy in the US:

The goal of supporting the best science must be interpreted as both helping to answer the most important scientific questions and involving the largest-possible fraction of the community who are engaged

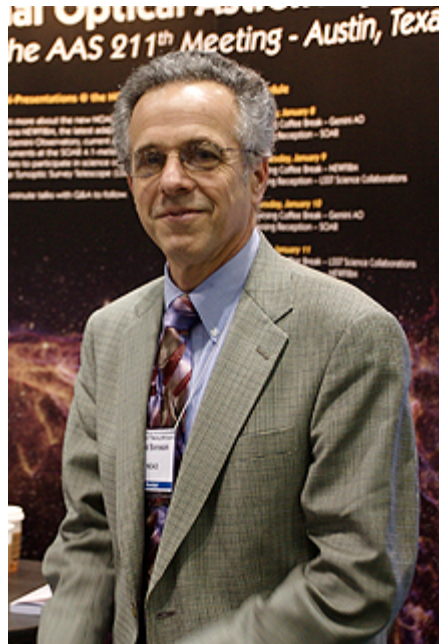
in scientific research. These are often not the same, but they must be considered equally important.

Keeping the 2–4 meter (and even the 6.5–10 meter) facilities active and at the state-of-the-art technologically is financially irrelevant to federal participation in the largest projects. These projects will require the better part of a billion dollars for significant community participation. Saving a few million on the current facilities will not help, but would drastically reduce the capability of many in the community to carry out their research.

There are synergies and complementarities of many types between different facilities. Exploiting the strengths of public and private, small and large, ground and space, will provide a system of capabilities for the US community that is the most effective and most efficient for carrying out their scientific research.

All these ideas point back to balance—a balance that can emerge from a continual engagement of all segments of the community. Much of what I have tried to do in the last 18 months is aimed at beginning this engagement. I know that doing this effectively takes a lot of effort, and it is much easier to imagine that leadership means knowing the right answer. I have found otherwise.

I believe that the NOAO scientific staff, including our new director, see this period as a special moment in NOAO's existence, a moment at which we have the opportunity to create something uniquely powerful for doing science—not because we have more resources, but because everyone will be pushing in the same direction. I look forward to helping Dave guide this engagement in the most effective ways that he can.



The NOAO Road Show

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As part of our renewed effort to talk with astronomers throughout the country to inform them about our program and to better understand their needs, I gave a presentation to the Mid-American Regional Astrophysics Conference (MARAC) in Kansas City, MO, in April. The invitation came originally from Angela Speck (University of Missouri), a member of the NOAO Users Committee, but it was reinforced by Bruce and Barbara Twarog (University of Kansas), two of the conference organizers. This was exactly the sort of opportunity that I had been looking for: astronomers in large departments encounter a lot of visitors, while those in small departments are more isolated.

The meeting was great. It included faculty and students from the two universities mentioned above, as well as Truman State University, Missouri State University, Washburn University, Kansas State University, the University of Nebraska, Baker University, Benedictine College, and Luther College. Talks covered research on dark energy, dust around evolved stars, instabilities in magnetized rotating neutron stars, and a number of education-related projects.

The talk I gave was aimed at accomplishing three goals: (1) provide a description of the NOAO program so that anyone—particularly students—would realize the range of capabilities, services, and support that we offer, (2) explain how our program has changed since the NSF Senior Review so that those who had been NOAO users in the past would understand what was different since their last experience, and (3) identify issues or decisions where we really need community input to proceed. I think the talk was successful in all three areas, and I got some good ideas from discussions during the meeting with a number of participants.

Overall, I thought this was a worthwhile experience, and I intend to look for additional opportunities for NOAO staff to make these sorts of visits. If you would like to have someone from NOAO come to your department or regional conference to make a presentation and interact with the people there, please email us at currents@noao.edu.

Announcing ALTAIR

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The Renewing Small Telescopes for Astronomical Research (ReSTAR) committee recently concluded its study of the needs of the US community for capabilities on small and mid-size telescopes. In consultation with the NSF astronomy division, NOAO staff are developing a detailed plan to implement the recommendations in the ReSTAR report, including providing increased community access to small and mid-size telescopes and renewing their instrumentation.

As the next activity aimed at understanding how to build a balanced national system of optical/infrared ground-based facilities, we have initiated a new committee charged to perform a similar task for telescopes in the 6.5–10 meter aperture range. This committee, named Access to Large Telescopes for Astronomical Instruction and Research (ALTAIR), is scheduling its first meeting for mid-June.

Like ReSTAR, ALTAIR will attempt to gather input from as broad a spectrum of the US astronomical community as possible. The committee has been asked to evaluate the community's immediate needs for large telescopes—amount of time, instrumental capabilities, observing modes—and to predict how those needs might evolve over the next decade. Also like ReSTAR, the members of the committee are not solely individual representatives, but are expected to use their contacts within the community to draw wider input, and to use their experience and wisdom to synthesize this input into a set of reason-

able, justifiable recommendations. The committee's charge, meeting reports, and links to other relevant information will be available on the NOAO Web site.

Larry Ramsey (Penn State University) has agreed to chair ALTAIR, and the membership includes:

Daniel Eisenstein (University of Arizona)
 Heidi Hammel (Space Science Institute)
 Terry Herter (Cornell University)
 Lynne Hillenbrand (Caltech)
 David Koo (University of California at Santa Cruz)
 Tom Matheson (NOAO)
 Andy McWilliam (Carnegie Institution of Washington)
 John Monnier (University of Michigan)
 Lisa Prato (Lowell Observatory)
 Seth Redfield (Wesleyan University)
 Tom Soifer (Spitzer Science Center)
 Joan Najita (NOAO)

I note that ReSTAR is considered successful because of the large volume of community input that went into the formulation of its recommendations. I hope that when you hear about opportunities to communicate your ideas to ALTAIR, you will do so with the same positive energy and attention to detail.