

INDUSTRIAL EFFORTS

Plenty of Jobs, Little Minority Support in Biotech

Hank Wu is a biotechnology success story, and if you ask him, he'll tell you that being a Chinese-American scientist hasn't helped or hindered him one bit. Wu is chief executive officer of Pharmagenesis Inc., a San Francisco-based biotech firm he founded 3 years ago. That makes him one of the scant few minority CEOs at the roughly 1200 U.S. biotech companies, but nevertheless Wu has a rosy message to minority scientists looking to break into biotech: "What's required to succeed in this field is a vision, a strategy, a dedication to make things happen." What isn't required, he says, "is to belong to an ethnic group."

Wu's opinions are shared by many who find that the wide-open biotechnology industry offers color-blind opportunity, especially in small, rapidly growing companies. But this is not the only minority tale in biotech. Another set of minority scientists, often at larger firms, say that as the industry matures, opportunities for minorities are falling short of what they should be, especially at the top—and that both companies and industry groups could do more in the way of organized support for minority scientists.

"There's a feeling of frustration—when I see people in technical positions getting promoted, they're not minorities," says Chinese-American microbiologist Raymond Chan, a senior scientist at Ortho Diagnostic Systems Inc.'s Santa Monica laboratory. Chan says he doesn't perceive an inherent bias against minority scientists, rather a situation in which "management tends to promote people who they're most comfortable with." At biotech giant Genentech, Inc., for example, there are no black senior scientists, says clinical trials analyst Monique Carver, who is black.

Part of the reason for these disparate views seems to be company size. While minority scientists at larger companies may find that "glass ceilings" impede their rise through the ranks, at smaller companies, ethnicity simply is not a concern, say Wu and others. "I have never been exposed to negative things people ascribe to being minority," says Hispanic microbiologist Reinaldo Gomez, president of South San Francisco-based Terrapin Technologies; Gomez emigrated to the U.S. from Cuba in 1960.

That could prove to be good news: Not only is the biotech industry growing, but many of the new science jobs are arising in small companies. In the past two years, the industry's total employment has grown 34%, from 70,000 total employees in 1991 to 94,000 this year, including some 18,000 scientists, according to the accounting firm Ernst & Young, which also estimates

that 3 of 4 firms have fewer than 50 employees (*Science*, 24 September, p. 1788).

But are many—or any—of those jobs going to minorities? Minority biologists in industry aren't quite as scarce as, say, minority physicists (see chart). Still, it's hard to know exactly how many minority Ph.D.s fill the ranks of biotech companies, because counting them is like conducting a census in which households won't respond. Of 10 biotech firms contacted, only one would reveal the percentage of minorities among its Ph.D. scientists: Genetics Institute reported that 12.4% of its Ph.D. staffers are minorities, including Asian-Americans as well as underrepresented groups.

And industry analysts have put these issues on the back burner. The Biotechnology Industry Organization, the industry's main lobby group, says it doesn't keep data or analyses on minority representation among firms. The same is true for organizations that track the industry, such as the North Carolina Biotechnology Center and Ernst & Young. Says one biotech analyst, who preferred to remain anonymous, "I hate to admit this, but we've done a really poor job at following this issue."

Representatives of individual companies insist their firms pay close attention to minority candidates when hiring—but, citing employee privacy, they won't release the data that could prove it.

Several of the larger, well-established biotech companies do make an effort to attract minority students to the biotech industry; recruiters from Genentech, for instance,

visit traditionally black colleges and heavily Hispanic schools and travel to conferences of minority organizations.

Practicing scientists, however, are on their own. No company contacted by *Science* had special programs geared to mentor or retain minority scientists. This is due in part to the frenetic pace at both small and large biotech firms, says Gomez. "You're in such a hurry to bring in qualified personnel, you don't have time to enhance the [ethnic] mix," he says. Another factor is the feeling, especially in small biotech companies, that nothing stands in your way but yourself, says Wu. "We have to let our successes speak for themselves," he says.

Yet minority scientists at one larger company—Genentech—don't think that going it alone is the surest path to success, and they are banding together to promote their agenda. At Genentech, Carver and several black colleagues have formed a group called African-Americans in Biotech, now composed of 20 Genentech employees. They visit minority high schools to encourage students to pursue science and are beginning to lobby for more minority hires at their company. "We certainly aren't where we'd like to be," say Carver.

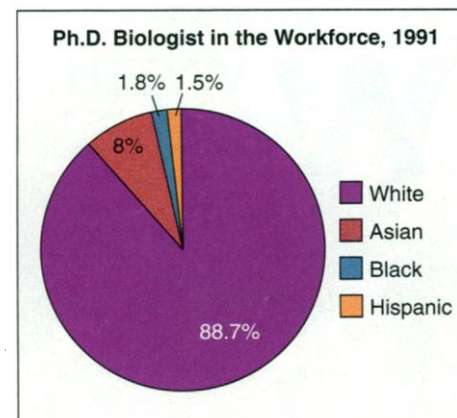
—Richard Stone



Banding together. At Genentech, minority employees are just beginning to promote their agenda.

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Seeking diversity. The biological ranks have few minorities.

SOURCE: NSF