

## PROFILE NEW YORK ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

# How Fast Can an Old Dog Learn New Tricks?

With its membership shrinking and its flagship magazine closed, the New York Academy of Sciences searches for new ways to serve a global community

The New York Academy of Sciences proudly calls itself “one of New York City’s oldest and most enduring cultural institutions.” For 185 years, it has been a gathering place for the region’s scientific elite, and it now performs a long list of civic functions, from sponsoring public lectures and the city’s annual student science fair to studying how to clean up New York Harbor. But its name carries a cachet far beyond the confines of New York. Physicist and human rights activist Andrei Sakharov chose the academy’s imposing, four-story mansion on New York City’s upper-crust east side in 1988 to make his first public U.S. appearance and to thank the academy for helping secure his release from the Soviet Union. And from Bucharest to Bangkok, framed letters hang proudly on the walls of research labs proclaiming their owners’ membership in the far-off academy.

But the institution’s long and illustrious history didn’t prevent it from experiencing a near-implosion last fall. Faced with a mounting financial crisis, Rodney Nichols, the academy’s president and chief executive officer, proposed selling its landmark headquarters to a Middle East potentate. He also shut down the academy’s award-winning magazine, *The Sciences*, after a 40-year run. These steps—plus growing resentment of Nichols’s efforts to make the academy a player on the national science policy scene—triggered a near-insurrection by some former leaders. Nichols resigned in November after nearly 10 years as the academy’s head.

The academy’s immediate future now rests in the hands of Nobelist and Rockefeller University biologist Torsten Wiesel. Wiesel has pulled the building off the market, has trimmed budgets, and is focusing on serving the academy’s members, steps which seem to have steadied the ship. The big question is whether a membership organization created to foster scientific discourse can survive in a world in which more and more communication occurs electronically—and for free. “I’m skeptical whether this or any other organization of its type can continue to rely on a membership base,” says board member

Lawrence Buittenwieser, a New York lawyer and philanthropist. Although most scientific organizations face similar problems, the New York Academy may not be able to afford any wrong answers. “It’s important to overcome a sense of skepticism about the future of the academy,” says Wiesel. “People are still worrying about its mission.”

## Controversial choices

The academy’s financial condition has probably never been as solid as its imposing headquarters might suggest. Nichols, a longtime administrator at nearby Rockefeller Univer-



**Standing tall.** Torsten Wiesel has taken the academy’s landmark building off the market.

sity, benefited from an explosive growth in international members, from fewer than 10,000 in 1989 to nearly 25,000 in 1995. Unfortunately, the overseas rise masked a steady slide on the domestic side, from 32,000 members in 1989 to 14,500 last year. And when the international tide began to turn in the late 1990s—dropping to 11,000 last year—

Nichols found himself with a projected operating deficit of \$1.5 million, a crisis for an organization with a \$10 million budget.

The plunge in membership—from a peak of 46,300 in 1995 to 25,600 today—was only one part of a dismal financial picture. *The Sciences* had for years been losing about \$750,000 annually. Programmatic activities, ranging from a Web site for teachers to studies of the major pollutants in New York Harbor, generally cost more to run than they generated in grants, says Chief Financial Officer (CFO) Thomas Kelly. Only the *Annals*—well-regarded reports on 25 to 30 scientific conferences held each year—operated in the black.

The budget crisis prompted two radical steps. In October 2000, Nichols decided to sell the headquarters building, which he calls “a looming hazard.” Built in 1919 as a residence and donated to the academy in 1949 by a Woolworth heir, it was too small to serve a growing staff or to host large meetings. Nichols estimated that the sale would net \$20 million, creating an endowment for new and ongoing programs.

The decision, disclosed last spring, caused an uproar. “The proposed sale ... and move to some characterless building is a shocking idea,” wrote past president Fleur Strand, professor emerita of biology at New York University, in a recent letter to Wiesel. “This would inevitably translate into a further loss of membership.” But the sale never went through. The would-be buyer, the emir of the oil-rich state of Qatar in the Middle East, walked away from the deal just a few weeks after the 11 September terrorist attacks.

As this drama was unfolding, Nichols presented the board with a budget for the upcoming 2001–02 fiscal year that eliminated *The Sciences*. “We needed a vehicle to tell people what was happening at the academy, and [*The Sciences*] didn’t do that,” he says. In addition, he notes, fewer than 1% of the people who dropped their membership (\$95 a year for U.S. members and \$115 for everybody else, with discounts for students) remained subscribers. “People said they loved it, but they didn’t like it enough to pay \$20 [the U.S. nonmember rate] a year,” says Nichols.

The board went along, but many members lamented the loss of what they said was a primary reason to join the academy as well as an effective way to communicate with the public. Moreover, Nichols’s moves to disperse with these twin icons fed simmering resentment about his management style. “It was symptomatic of his aloof, top-down approach,” complains Brian Ferguson, a professor of anthropology at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey.

Ferguson and other active members were already seething about a proposal to trans-

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form the 23 discipline-based sections, the foundation of the academy's membership infrastructure, into interdisciplinary groupings. The old structure reflected "a 19th century view" of science, says Nichols. Many members worried, however, that the new arrangement was a stalking horse for Nichols's plan to become a bigger player in national science policy debates.

Toward that end, Nichols created the offices of education and science/technology policy, expanding the academy's menu beyond its traditional diet of conferences and publications. In 1998 he launched the harbor project, involving state and federal governments, industry, and environmental groups. It was in the academy's best tradition, according to Nichols and his supporters. Bill Green, a former Republican member of Congress and past chair of the governing board, points to a precedent: In the 1830s New York asked the academy to help find a new source of water to slake its growing thirst. Its report, he notes proudly, led to the establishment of the Croton Reservoir, which continues to serve the city.

But the harbor project will deliver less substantial results. A shortage of funds forced Nichols to narrow the focus from whether to dredge the harbor to studies of five major sources of pollution, and its first report, on mercury, is only now nearing completion.

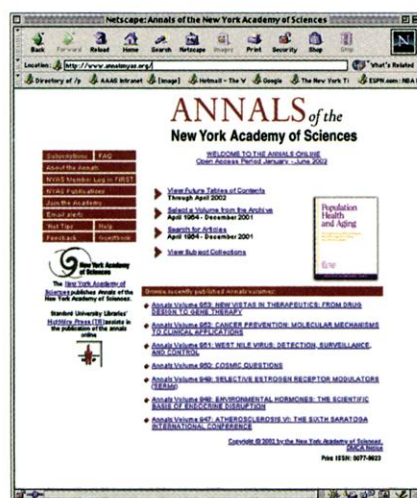
Alarmed by these developments, some senior academy members, including past presidents and section heads, drafted an alternative slate of candidates in September with the intention of seeking seats on the academy's 21-member board. Although their names never appeared on a ballot, the campaign was a major slap at Nichols's leadership. Soon after, Nichols told the board that he had decided to step down, and on 6 November the academy said that Wiesel, who in September succeeded Green as board chair, would also serve as interim executive director.

Nichols says he left to pursue new challenges, including an extensive schedule of travel and writing on global science policy issues. "The timing [of the failed building sale] was a coincidence," he says. "An element of staleness and frustration had crept into the job after 9 years, and I was ready to do new things."

### A full plate

There's no shortage of challenges for Nichols's successor. As president emeritus of Rockefeller University and head of the International Human Frontier Science Program based in Strasbourg, France, the 77-year-old Wiesel wasn't looking for another job. But he says he felt an obligation to pick up the pieces after Nichols departed.

Wiesel has already announced several steps intended to return the academy to its roots as a forum for scientific discourse, declaring that his primary focus will be to "rebuild membership from within." That's a signal that members' interests and needs will come before efforts devoted to national



**Info flow.** Officials hope that online access to the *Annals* series will offset the loss of *The Sciences* as a member benefit.

or global issues.

"I don't think that policy issues can be ignored," he says. "But if you are running a restaurant, you'd better be sure the local population eats there."

This month Wiesel also harvested the fruits of a project to put the past 3 years of the *Annals* online. It will save production costs and provide a convenience for members (who previously received one free report a year and five more for \$15 each, compared with a retail price of \$100 to \$150). Access is free to all until June, when the archive becomes a member benefit.

Those new policies have been accompanied by some serious belt-tightening. The academy's conference, education, and policy offices have been merged into one unit, and what was once a five-person development office, which CFO Kelly says "spent \$2 for every dollar it brought in," has been reduced to a single person. Staff members located in another building are being moved into the mansion, for an annual savings in rent of \$250,000.

Kelly expects that these and other steps will trim the deficit to \$535,000 for the fiscal year ending 30 June. That figure includes a \$500,000 charge for amortizing new computer equipment, Kelly says; without it, the

operating budget is nearly balanced. And he projects a \$600,000 surplus in 2003, when all the savings will have kicked in.

Internally, Wiesel hopes to shore up a governing board that has been accused of being too acquiescent. "It's easy for boards to fall asleep at the switch," says Cecily Cannan Selby, who chaired a 1998 academy conference on the status of women in science and engineering. Selby, a former university administrator and member of several corporate boards, faults Nichols for not consulting more with staff and members and says that his salary—at \$275,000 more than double the pay of any other staffer—threw the scales off balance and "diminished the strength of the organization." Some members also bristled at the inclusion on the board of business leaders and nationally known science policy figures burdened with other commitments.

One such prize catch was Green, who represented Manhattan for 14 years in Congress. Green's family foundation pledged \$1 million in 1998 to kick off the academy's first major capital drive if the academy could match it. But Green says he's withdrawn that pledge because the drive never really got off the ground. He's also resigned from the board because of policy differences with Wiesel. "I felt that we should have kept the building on the market," he says. "It's a wonderful building, but it's also an albatross. So in fairness to Torsten, I felt that I should stand aside and clear the path for him."

Another board member, former presidential science adviser D. Allan Bromley, a staunch backer of Nichols, also plans to step down: "I think it's appropriate for me to resign, because I was there at the request of Rod." Not so Bittenwieser, another Nichols recruit. "Holding on to such a large non-productive asset [the building] is a mistake," he says. But "I'm not going to walk away just because I'm skeptical."

Officials are hoping that online access to the *Annals* will prove to be a major drawing card for prospective members. But if the numbers continue to fall, whether in reaction to the loss of *The Sciences* or for some other reason, then the financial picture could again darken.

Wiesel agrees that "the main thing is to stem the decline in membership." Once that occurs, he says, the new executive director can build a new team, solicit contributions from private donors, and chart a new course for the academy. Wiesel thinks that the academy will rebound, but he's not making any promises. "My term as chair ends in September 2003," he says. "It should be clear by then how it's going."

—JEFFREY MERVIS

