

Texas and Oklahoma are OK!
*A meeting on April 30th, 2004 in the Board Room of Presbyterian Health Foundation
in Oklahoma City*

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Preamble

About six years ago, I got to know a Philadelphia native **Kenneth Dormer** through my peripheral affiliation with **AFRET** (African Regional Training Network for Medical and Allied Health Sciences). Ken is a professor of physiology in the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center (<http://www.ouhsc.edu>). Since coming to Texas more than three years ago, I have often talked to Ken – and Ken had visited UTD on three occasions – about getting together in Oklahoma to explore opportunities for collaboration. I was also eager to visit, especially this is one of the few states I have not visited since I came to the United States in 1964.

With my past association with the HUBS (Hospitals, Universities, Businesses and Schools) project for Delaware, New Jersey, Maryland and Pennsylvania, I am convinced that with careful planning, interstate institutional collaborations can indeed result in intellectual and economic win-win scenarios!

This was why when Ken invited me to visit Oklahoma City to meet with many of the movers and shakers of the state in science and technology, I jumped at the opportunity!

I should mention that a good friend of mine (and also a good friend of UTD), Dr. Bob Slocum, CEO and Founder of Polatomic Corporation (<http://www.polatomic.com>) in Richardson, had been urging me to visit his home state. Therefore, for this trip, I invited Bob to come along. His understanding of the OK landscape, culture, and people was invaluable!

And movers and shakers they are:

- **Joseph Alexander**, Secretary of Science and Technology, State of Oklahoma
- **Michael Anderson**, President, Presbyterian Health Foundation
- **Kenneth Dormer**, Professor, Oklahoma University Health Sciences Center
- **Michael Gilmore**, Vice President for Research, Oklahoma University Health Sciences Center
- **Thomas Gray**, Manage and Lead Development, Oklahoma Department of Commerce
- **Sid Hudson**, Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education
- **William Sibley**, President, Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology (OCAST)

- **Frank Waxman**, Professor OUHSC and Director Oklahoma EPSCoR
- **T. H. Lee Williams**, Professor OU and Vice President for Research Administration

The Meeting

The meeting took place in the elegant board room of Presbyterian Health Foundation (PHF), a private 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization with the mission of promoting biotechnology for Oklahoma. The President, Dr. Michael Anderson, who has a very interesting background as a theologian, is a very impressive entrepreneur. PHF, which is housed in a very large campus, works with and transforms the intellectual strengths of Oklahoma University Health Science Center as well as other high-tech outfits of Oklahoma, such as Oklahoma University in Norman, Oklahoma State University in Stillwater and University of Tulsa, into business units. With the PHF campus sitting right next to the OUHSC and the State Government, with the offices of Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, the Oklahoma counterpart of Texas' THECB housed in the same building, I can see that PHF is the heart of the biotechnology effort of Oklahoma.

My impressions about the meeting are as follows:

Oklahoma seems to have a very well organized science and technology promotional structure. There are two main reasons, as far as I can surmise, for this.

One is because it has a very active OCAST, a state organization specifically designed to promote the transition of lab to market effort. The president of OCAST, Dr. William Sibley, an outstanding scientist, is a very visionary and seasoned scientist/university administrator/entrepreneur. As a native OK'er, Bill has extensive experience as an NSF officer and was a provost of a major Southern university. For example, with Bill at the helm, Oklahoma's SBIR awards per capita is now higher than the national average! This is an area where as vice president for research of UTD, I would be very interested to tap into Bill's wisdom and experience.

The next is the very well organized effort of going after NSF's EPSCoR (Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research) funding. EPSCoR is an NSF program instituted in the mid-eighties (when I was still at the NSF and so I have some familiarity of the program) to stimulate states below certain threshold of research dollars from the NSF to increase their funding. After nearly 20 years, this is now a very extensive and competitive program. In fact, according Frank Waxman, the director of OK's EPSCoR program, this effort has become the coordinator of the state-wide nanotechnology program. In fact, OK's EPSCoR maintained an extremely useful webpage which lists most of the active researchers in the state (<http://www.oepscor.org/programs/nnresearchers.htm>).

Some personal impressions

From what I heard, I have the following observations.

First, around the table, we all recognize that collaboration must be based on quality science and technology. Vaporware is absolutely not tolerated.

Second, Oklahoma is the closest neighboring state to the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. In fact, Oklahoma City, Stillwater and Tulsa, the three cities where research universities of the State are situated, are all as close to the Metroplex as Austin, San Antonio, College Station and Houston. Therefore would it not be possible that the Metroplex could become the hub center of these intellectual and economic regions of both States?

Third, it was abundantly clear that this group of movers and shakers in OK are visionary, yet practical.

Fourth, a good friend of mine, and a member of the US House of Representative once gave me a political lesson: “No matter how many babies are born in any state, it can only have two senators!” He said that the founding fathers were brilliant to recognize the fact that while it would be inevitable that populations and political strengths could vary from state to state, it is nevertheless profoundly critical that there is one important aspect that all states are equal. The Senate representation is that one! Therefore, two states collaboration will “double” the powerful political strengths!

Fifth, I learned from this meeting that there are very active research programs throughout Oklahoma in nanomedicine. For example, according to Ken’s website (<http://ouhscphysio.org/dormer/>), it states that his lab is devoted to the “...*research and development of medical devices with research and teaching connections to the Oklahoma University Bioengineering Center (OUBC, Norman Campus), a private otologic research institutes and industry. An NIH study is underway in collaboration with NanoBioMagnetics Inc. of Oklahoma City using nanotechnology in otologic therapies. Implantable hearing devices we have co-developed are now implanted in over 60,000 patients worldwide.*”

With UTD’s strong interest in nanotechnology, strong collaboration with UT Southwestern Medical Center in audiology and now fledging discussions of the formation of a bioengineering program/department, the synergy seems to be obvious!

An Emotional Experience

On 9:02 am on April 19, 1995, The United States froze. “*On the morning of April 19, 1995, Timothy McVeigh parked a rented Ryder truck with explosives in front of the complex and, at 9:02am, a massive explosion occurred which sheared the entire north side of the building, killing 168 people.*” (from <http://www.oklahomacitynationalmemorial.org/hist.htm>)

After the meeting, Ken took Bob Slocum and me for a short tour of the Memorial which was built on the bombing site.

As we walked around this powerful and dignified site, we became emotional.