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With New Center, New York Aims for Genomics Leadership



Today, 11 of the city's academic medical centers, along with New York City and two industry partners, Roche and Illumina, announced the formation of the [New York Genome Center](#). Backed by a sturdy \$100 million in committed financing from sponsors, with goals of raising another \$25 million and employing 550 people within five years, it has ambitious plans. Beginning in February 2012, it will be offering revenue-generating sequencing and CLIA-based laboratory services, as well as opportunities for inter-institution collaboration, and training programs in bioinformatics and other cutting-edge biotech disciplines. Down the road, it seems intent on getting involved in other kinds of activities that pave the way for faster public acceptance of genomics technologies.

Those involved read like a who's who list of New York's scientific and biotech worlds: Welsh, Carson, Anderson & Stowe, Columbia University, and top officials of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, Cornell Medical College, The Jackson Laboratory, Memorial-Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, Mount Sinai, NYU School of Medicine, The Rockefeller University, North Shore – LIJ Health System, Venrock, Stony Brook University, and The Simons Foundation. And then of course, there's the pharma partner, Roche, with more pharma companies hopefully to follow, says Nancy Kelley, the attorney who co-founded the center and is its executive director.

The idea for a collaboration germinated from talks beginning in August 2010 between Kelley and Tom Maniatis, one of the world's top molecular biologists and entrepreneurs. The process came together relatively quickly, says Kelley, who, perhaps not coincidentally, is a Bostonian like Maniatis. Kelley is moving to New York and Maniatis recently became chairman of the department of biochemistry and molecular biophysics at Columbia University. In part, the timing was

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right, as local scientific and health care leaders realized that they were falling behind other regions as centers of innovation. "We are poised on a revolution in genomic medicine and New York has the strongest science in the world, but it is almost weakest in grant and sequencing activities," she says. "These institutions are at risk of ceding leadership in a huge industry."

As for industry, in addition to the fees Illumina and Roche have paid to play, Illumina is supplying the sequencing equipment—giving it a high profile position in a region with lots of multi-ethnic subjects to draw from. And Roche, with one of its two major U.S. R&D sites based across the river in Nutley, NJ, is eager to replicate in New York some of broader regional biopharma initiatives ongoing elsewhere. The effort to sign on Roche also may have been helped by connections (speculative but quite possible); Marc Tessier-Lavigne, president of The Rockefeller University and a board member of the new consortia, was CSO of Genentech until early 2011.

Unlike some of its Big Pharma brethren, Roche hasn't made any splashy new-model alliances with academia, but has tended to stay with low-key, smaller deals. And though it has made overtures to cut R&D spend, it hasn't undertaken the same kind of big reorgs as Sanofi, AstraZeneca, and Pfizer. "As a lot of big pharma companies move their R&D operations to Boston, we have chosen to remain in Nutley," Jacques Banchereau, SVP, DTA, head of inflammation and virology, and CSO at Roche Nutley, told an audience of several hundred at a ceremony announcing the consortia; Banchereau too has recently changed positions, joining Roche last year from the Texas-based Baylor Institute for Immunology Research, which he founded.

As a die-hard New Yorker, it's good and timely to see NY academic institutions, local government, and industry finally get their act together -- or at least make a start. They've had a history of infighting and competing, with efforts to come together collapsing. Nor has the city government been terribly supportive, focused as it is on financial services, fashion and media. (Given New York's reputation as a place where start ups get born, funded, and then flee, it's no surprise that the local biotech [Vivaldi Biosciences](#), co-founded more than three years ago by Mount Sinai Medical Center scientists, has made a splash because of its decision to keep its headquarters in New York, although its key venture backer Bay City Capital is based in San Francisco.)

Not that New York hasn't already taken some steps to stake out a regional claim on biotech: the new East River Science Park, with laboratories and corporate space designed specifically for life sciences companies is fully leased, including at least two big pharma tenants, Pfizer and Lilly (Kelley previously was an SVP at Alexandria, which developed the ERSP). And Pfizer has pulled together a consortium of seven New York academic medical centers as part of its expansive [Centers for Therapeutic Innovation R&D network](#) – although word has it that proposals initially selected in New York came from a few of the participating institutions, not all, as originally hoped.

Plenty remains unsettled – not least the location and capacity of the new laboratories. Trickier may be figuring out how data will be shared and intellectual property protected—issues that are under discussion but not yet resolved and are key challenges for other kinds of life sciences consortia. And trickiest of all may be keeping many big and

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[ambitious egos happy; the institutions involved are building their own programs in the same space as NYGC](#). The deal is in its early days and may work out dandy, but likely faces similar challenges as do other broad industry collaborations.

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