

Stephen Emerson goes back to his roots

Karen Honey

J Clin Invest. 2009;119(7):1742-1742. <https://doi.org/10.1172/JCI40106>.

News

One of the JCI's Deputy Editors, Stephen G. Emerson, is stepping aside, after almost two and a half years in the position, to focus on his role as the thirteenth president of Haverford College in Haverford, Pennsylvania, USA. Emerson (Figure 1) has been a Deputy Editor on the editorial board of the JCI since a group of researchers at the University of Pennsylvania took over the leadership of the journal in March 2007. At that time, he ran a highly successful laboratory researching the biology and clinical potential of bone marrow stem cells. However, on July 1st, 2007, Emerson returned to his alma mater as the thirteenth president. The JCI recently got a chance to talk to Emerson about his time as a Deputy Editor of the JCI, his role as president of Haverford College, and what the future holds. JCI: You spent nearly two and half years as Deputy Editor of the JCI. What was the most important thing that you learned? Emerson: Science is continually evolving, and the standards of scientific quality are continuously increasing. What we might have found novel and important five years ago we no longer do, as other, competing observations move similar and related fields along ever more quickly. I've also been reminded how enjoyable it is to discuss great science with colleagues from [...]

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JCI: You spent nearly two and half years as Deputy Editor of the *JCI*. What was the most important thing that you learned?

Emerson: Science is continually evolving, and the standards of scientific quality are continuously increasing. What we might have found novel and important five years ago we no longer do, as other, competing observations move similar and related fields along ever more quickly. I've also been reminded how enjoyable it is to discuss great science with colleagues from a variety of fields.

JCI: For most of your time as Deputy Editor of the *JCI* you were also President of Haverford College. How did you manage to balance the demands of your position at Haverford and the demands of the journal?

Emerson: I maintain a laboratory at Haverford (it may be the only funded stem cell biology lab at a liberal arts college) that we run just like my old lab at Penn, except it's undergraduates, not post-docs, so I love to remain in science. But the added time involved in reviewing and supervising reviews has been extraordinary. Thank goodness for wonderful reviewers, editors, and staff, and the internet after midnight.

JCI: Why is now a good time to step down from the editorial board of the *JCI* to focus on Haverford College?

Emerson: There's never a good time, and

I will deeply miss the *JCI*. But being a college president is already two jobs, and the candle has just burned too thin.

JCI: What drove your decision to leave academia and become President of Haverford College?

Emerson: Ouch. I hope I haven't left academia! But I know what you mean. The answer is really simple: I had the fortune of attending Haverford College many years ago (1970–1974); I think it's the best place in the world to educate smart, idealistic 18- to 22-year-olds; and I was honored to serve when asked. I do love the idea of trying to figure out the best ways to prepare



Figure 1

Stephen G. Emerson says he is enjoying the challenge of being the thirteenth president of Haverford College, a place he describes as "the ultimate 'hands-on' community."

students to be the sort of physician-scientists (or legal theorists, public policy activists, poets, playwrights, or teachers) who will really change the world for the better in the next half-century.

JCI: As you mention above, you are a Haverford College alumnus. What was it about the undergraduate experience that brought you back as President?

Emerson: I had the good fortune to be

able to study everything from non-equilibrium thermodynamics to complex analysis and differential topology to continental philosophy, to play lacrosse, make best friends for life, and to really learn that there is "a common spark" in everyone. Can't beat that.

JCI: Do you miss being an active physician-scientist?

Emerson: I do miss being a full-time physician-scientist, for sure. But hopefully, if my students stay as incredibly engaged as they were this past year (we're sending off two papers this summer) and I can keep getting to a couple of meetings per year, I won't go too far away. But if I ever were to leave science in the (far) future, I would dearly miss it, because all my Haverford science faculty are active investigators (NIH, NSF, and/or HHMI funded, etc.).

JCI: What plans do you have to stay connected to the scientific community, now that you are no longer on the editorial board of the *JCI*?

Emerson: In addition to our own science, and meetings, I would like to become more involved in policy questions and venues involving nourishing the pipeline of physician-scientists. We graduate four or five combined-degree matriculants every year (about 1.5% of our senior class), but I realize that this is not the norm nationally. So I would like to see if we can offer what we've learned from our experience, learn from others with different viewpoints, and see if we can help together, on a national level.

JCI: We understand you are a keen bridge player. One of your partners indicates that your style is "aggressively, perhaps irrationally, optimistic". Assuming you concur, has this approach to bridge helped you in your approach to being President of Haverford?

Emerson: Hah! But seriously, isn't being relentlessly optimistic (while also self-critical) the key to success in science? It certainly is the key to growing into a potentially happy and successful college graduate, so I hope that I'm just leading by doing. The bottom line is . . . I can't help it.

Karen Honey