

Career Series

Interview with Dr. Sheldon Schuster, President and Professor, Keck Graduate Institute



Dr. Sheldon Schuster is the President of the Keck Graduate Institute, a member of The Claremont Colleges consortium located in Claremont, California. KGI offers a number of academic programs meant to train students to work in the bioscience industry. Dr. Schuster received his Ph.D. from University of Arizona, completed a postdoc at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and held two faculty positions before becoming the president of KGI.

Basic job description:

I am the President of the Keck Graduate Institute (KGI). At a place that is young and relatively small, being the president is a completely different job description than what you would expect at other universities. I am involved in all aspects of the school and don't need to delegate everything to vice presidents and provosts; I am involved with students, faculty, course development, guiding the direction of the institution, and working with donors and our board. Usually presidents deal with donors and upper-ups and not with the students and faculty, so this is a really thrilling position.

Type of education/training required:

Before taking this position, I never had experience in administration, I advanced strictly as faculty. Coming up doing the science is a bit more important than first being an Assistant Dean, etc., because getting experience as a functionary administrator is not particularly useful. I've had no education or training that is specifically relevant to being the president of an institution. I was faculty at the University of Florida and the director of a biotech program, so I got involved in support for research and understanding the business side of biotechnology. I also helped build an interdisciplinary center there that provides biotechnology services to other laboratories. All of that experience, coupled with networking, is how I came to Keck. It's about who you meet and who you bump into.

Special talents or skills that contribute to career:

Generally speaking, people don't know how to teach leadership, but we can teach some basic tenants. I enjoy talking to people, and I like to listen. Listening is a really crucial leadership skill—it takes practice because it's not something that comes instinctually. Other leadership skills are learned in the school of hard knocks, you learn by doing. And the biggest parts of leadership are the things you learned at home: honesty, politeness. It is also helpful to have a healthy sense of humor.

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Average income range for people working in your area (entry level through experienced persons):

The salaries for university presidents are very good, and I have no issue or complaints. Administrators get paid quite well; it's appropriate, because it's a hard job! College presidents make good money, some up to \$2,000,000; however, this depends a great deal on the institution. However, I wouldn't recommend chasing the salary.

What is involved in a typical workday?

My job has incredible variety, so no day is typical and it's never boring. I have an open door policy, and I spend a lot of time walking around the campus. You never know what is going to come across your desk, and by being accessible you will hear incredible things all the time that normally people wouldn't tell you.

I do spend a lot of time raising money, like most presidents of academic institutions. I think it's fun, because I am doing it for education and research support, and I am working with donors who are accomplished people who appreciate science and recognize the need for this type of unique institution. Usually my day has at least one social event, many of which focus on entertaining and fundraising.

I also make lots of phone calls, and I sit in on lots of committee meetings. There is a lot to do at KGI in part because it is such a new institution. Sometimes we have no system in place for something critical; when I first became president, for instance, there was no system in place for evaluating faculty. My day includes meetings about developing such systems. We can also quickly develop new programs if we see a need. About four years ago the vice president and I wondered what was happening with postdocs; were they prepared to go into industry if they wanted to? We spent a few months looking into it, and realized that there was an educational gap that we could help fill. We outlined the program via a brochure, asked the board, asked industry experts about it, talked to faculty, and tweaked the program until everyone said it was good. And it was quickly launched.

What do you like the best about your work? The least?

The fun part is having common goals with people who are working together to solve a tough or important problem. We do have crises and emergencies at times, but working with people who you respect and have common goals to solve them is great. And we're all in it together. I also didn't expect how interesting and exciting it would be to work with the board. The president is involved with building the board; as opposed to a corporate board, our board members give money to the institution (instead of making money), and they are concerned about the outcome of the institution. Most of our board members are actively involved in the bioscience industry, and are coming in with a unique perspective. They have never been

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affiliated with KGI because it's too young (we have no alumni on the board yet!), so they need to buy into the principles behind it. After they have done so, I find the areas where their interests really lie so they can work specifically on that. They are passionate, smart, and involved.

What I like the least includes some of the personnel issues. It can be really tough. Sometimes you have to make hard decisions, and they are never fun, and they *should* be difficult. It is a part of what you have to do to maintain a quality institution but I don't enjoy it.

How does your current position compare to working in other settings, like academia or industry?

Though I am still in academia, being the president is entirely different than being a faculty member. It is simultaneously fun and scary to have such influence. You can say "this would be cool!" and then people work to *do it*. You have to wield the power carefully. Like working in industry or being faculty, the job has pressure. It's a different kind of pressure, but it is still pressured.

Why did you choose this career?

The career chose me! I wasn't planning on it, but I love it. I was going to be vice president for research at another institution. I was asked if I'd be interested in running a small college in southern California, and I was hesitant because I'd never run anything before. I went out to visit KGI and fell in love. People love the process of planning their career or life goals, but usually it never works out according to plan, which can be a great thing.

What are your career goals?

My plan is to stay here in this position until they tell me I have to leave. At this stage, there is so much to do here that I will be very busy for a long time.

What path did you take to get to your current position?

I received my bachelor's degree from the University of California-Davis, and I got my PhD in Biochemistry from the University of Arizona. I then completed a postdoc at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and took a faculty position in the Chemistry and Life Sciences department at the University of Nebraska. From there, I moved to the University of Florida, where I was an assistant vice president and the director of the biotech program. Then I came to KGI.

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In what ways does your degree help you with this job?

Since my degree was in biochemistry, my degree is the job. It is important to have good taste in science and recognize it well enough to hire good people. Understanding resumes is crucial.

I love the science and I am a science nerd, and that's been important as we build this institution. There is a natural tension between business and science. What's the balance when we develop our curricula, more of one or the other? There is no right answer, but it's an important piece of tension. It is distressing to see PhDs not thinking that their science is useful; in industry, understanding the science is critical. Without it, you can't successfully run things through the FDA. And you certainly can't run a production facility without understanding the science.

If you could begin again in your career, what would you do differently?

There are so many interesting topics of research now, I might have picked a different area to study, or had a hard time choosing between topics. I stayed in science because I had a great laboratory experience as an undergraduate, and I would definitely not change that part of my career. Students have to get in the fun part of science early on so they get hooked, and learning about the unknown and *how* to do science is the fun part. So it almost doesn't matter which laboratory they are in as an undergraduate, if we can give them experience in any area and get them learning how to do science, I think that is a critical step in any scientific career.

What would be your career advice to someone who is currently in a genetics Ph.D. program? To someone who is currently a postdoctoral associate?

Based on a survey of members of the National Postdoc Association and the University of California school system, when many students finish up a PhD, the only thing that they feel suited to do in industry is research. However, one of the reasons that we started the postdoctoral program at KGI is that members of industry say that they won't hire PhDs without experience. That's because there is more to working in industry than just the ability to research, and most PhD programs don't give people those extra skills. It's up to the student to get those extra skills, which are mostly communication and social skills.

My advice to everyone is to go meet people, and build a network. I don't mean an electronic network, because LinkedIn is not going to cut it. When I say "build a network," I am not referring to idle schmoozing; rather, work with people, learn about them, ask them questions, engage with them. People don't hire resumes, they hire people.