

Meet OU's NEW PROVOST, *André-Denis Wright*

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

Students, faculty and staff at the University of Oklahoma will be greeted by a new provost and senior vice president when they return to campus this fall. If they're lucky, they may even get tea and scones in the bargain. An internationally recognized microbiologist, André-Denis Wright is a self-described "people person" who thrives on interaction with others.

"One of the things I missed when I left Australia was morning tea," says Wright, who comes to OU via Washington State University. "Students, staff and faculty got together every morning for tea or coffee. Organic collaborations occur when people talk to each other."

Wright, a native of Nova Scotia, knows a thing or two about collaboration. At the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) in Australia, where he worked for more than a decade, he held the title of "research innovator." In addition to his research in microbial biology and metagenomics, he was tasked with bringing people from different disciplines together to look at problems in novel ways.

"Whenever the chief scientists at CSIRO wanted to take research in a new direction, we would go out and talk to our leaders and our teams. It was getting all parties to see the big picture and how they could contribute," he says. "And that was really cool."

While working as a change agent at CSIRO, a personal loss led Wright to seek new applications for his own research in animal prebiotic and probiotic functions. "My mom was diagnosed with colorectal cancer and 13 months later she was gone," he says.

Wright began developing molecular tools to monitor

microbial populations in the human gastrointestinal tract. The result was finding a biomarker that could identify changes in the human colon during the onset of colorectal cancer, Crohn's disease and diverticulosis, greatly improving a patient's prognosis. Colon cancer is the third most lethal cancer in the United States, yet it has a 90% survival rate if diagnosed during Stage 1.

Wright has held administrative leadership roles at major research universities and has developed international partnerships from Brazil to Japan. He is also the first OU provost to have a species named for him. In 2008, researchers discovered a unique, ciliated protozoa in the coastal waters off Hong Kong and named it "Apokeronopsis wrighti" in recognition of Wright's many contributions to microbiology.

Despite an obvious aptitude for science, Wright entertained other career paths while growing up in Canada, raised by a single mother and grandmother. "We didn't have running water in the house, or central heating," he recalls. "I thought my way out would be to play professional football. My cousin played for the Dallas Cowboys. While I was in graduate school, he would say to me, 'André, you're the lucky one.'"

"I'd look at him and laugh and say, 'You have two Super Bowl rings. I have student loans, and I'm the lucky one?' But fast-forwarding 30 years, I'd have to say, 'Yeah.' I've been able to work with scientists all over the world, and now I have this amazing opportunity to be provost at the University of Oklahoma."

In his new position, Wright will manage academic initiatives on the Norman campus, including overseeing curricular standards and academic policies, faculty recruitment and development, institutional planning and budgeting, and resource and enrollment management.

"Through his many accomplishments as a renowned scientist and a proven administrative leader, Dr. André-Denis Wright has demonstrated a unique commitment to collaboration and scholarly excellence, making him an ideal choice to serve as provost," says OU President Joe Harroz Jr.



Travis Caperton

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“Our university’s pursuit to become one of the nation’s top public research institutions while equipping our students for a lifetime of positive impact will be bolstered by Dr. Wright’s essential leadership.”

Wright says he was familiar with OU through collegiate sports, but what attracted him to the University was the alignment of his personal values with OU’s new strategic plan.

“Keeping education affordable, giving students the education and tools they need to make them job ready, reaching out to under-represented students, focusing on

research opportunities for undergraduates, and supporting graduate students—all of that resonates with me.”

He also sees a huge opportunity for increased collaborations with the OU Health Sciences Center and OU-Tulsa.

“When you can bring in transdisciplinary research involving two, three, four, even five colleges, you get diversity in thought, diversity in experiences, diversity in discipline, and diversity in culture. People see things from different angles, and to be able to put those teams together and tackle global problems in a new way is exciting.”