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A View from Melrose

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Science is thriving here

My wife and I live in the President's House on campus in McMinnville, and we both have jobs that keep us very busy. We also have a black Labrador retriever named Edgar. Fortunately we've been able to find Linfield students who are willing to take Edgar on his daily noontime stroll.

For some time, our student dog walker has been Katie Corp '14, who is majoring in chemistry and mathematics. Katie is a quintessential Linfield student: she's active on campus, works as a residence hall assistant and has lots of friends. She's also a brilliant student.

We had to find a substitute dog walker last summer – not because Katie had a job at home in Idaho, but rather because she was conducting research at the Université Paul Sabatier in Toulouse, France. Katie was one of a handful of students selected from hundreds of applicants who sought to do scientific research there. Clearly she is smart and talented, but she was also successful because she had already done so much scientific research alongside her Linfield professors. The same was true for her classmate, Jasper Erickson '13, who did a research internship in Germany last summer, and for Kevin Romero '15, who was conducting research at Northwestern University in Illinois.

Linfield has a long-standing history of excellence in the sciences. Our professors began collaborative research with undergraduates in the 1950s, decades before it became fashionable at other colleges. The Linfield Research Institute spawned a series of science and technology companies that exist even today. And we can boast many alumni who have gone on to notable careers in medicine, science and technology.

Jingsong Zhu is one of Linfield's newest trustees. Born and raised in China, Jingsong graduated from Linfield in 1993. He later earned a Ph.D. at USC and then moved back to Beijing, where he is a professor at the National Center for Nanoscience and Technology.

Last year I told Jingsong that our new strategic plan called for a reinvestment in the sciences, and I asked for his advice. Jingsong is both bright and wise, and thus he said that he could not give me a comprehensive answer until he knew more. But he already knew three things: First, our facilities must be very flexible because science is always changing. Second, faculty offices and labs should not be divided by department, because science is now largely interdisciplinary. Third, our current facilities, designed decades ago, lack flexibility and hinder interdisciplinary work.

Notwithstanding the limitations of our facilities, the sciences are alive and thriving at Linfield. We have a "scientific boot camp" program, iFOCUS, that brings new freshmen to campus to do research with science professors from a variety of disciplines. Each summer a group of faculty work with student teams on research in McMinnville. And our faculty are now working on new interdisciplinary research projects with their advanced students.

The next step is to plan and construct the facilities that will enable our faculty and students to be even more successful. In the 1950s, America awakened to the promise of science, and Linfield became a leader among small colleges. Today, as American leaders again cite a need for superior education in the sciences, we have a new opportunity – and a renewed obligation to our students and faculty. We are already doing well; in the future we need to do even better. 🍷

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– Thomas L. Hellie
President