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Research institute in Watertown on verge of closing - The Boston Globe

Shirley Leung

Research centers across the Boston area have struggled with a tough funding environment due to a tightened budget at the National Institutes of Health, the largest funder of biomedical research in the country. A vote to close the institute would illustrate just how drastic those cuts can be in places without sizable endowments to help survive downturns.

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"We've been crunched," said Charles Emerson, a senior scientist and director of the institute. "Our main business plan is NIH funding and we tried. . . . On the overall picture, it's not been very successful the last two years with grants."

Emerson said about half of the 16 active faculty have secured new jobs. He will move to the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

In a letter sent to corporation members and provided to the Globe, Lucia Rameh, a principal scientist at the institute who has not yet found a job, noted that over 11 years at the institute she has brought in \$6 million in research and operating funds and is working on a study of cancer drugs.

"Even in the best-case scenario, in which I can land a job, I will have to temporarily relocate my lab or return my grant money to the NIH," Rameh wrote. "This disruption or termination of my lab runs counter to the mission of BBRI."

The institute has tried to cut corners to survive, Emerson said, noting that it is less than half the size it was at its peak, with about 46 employees. After the economy tanked, he said, there was a salary freeze and cut. Cost-cutting measures spanned a wide range, from renegotiating utility contracts to cutting conveniences such as providing coffee on every floor.

Sherwin Sam Lehrer, a tenured senior scientist at the institute, said the efforts have not been aggressive enough to save the collaborative scientific environment where top-notch research has been done over the years, especially in the area of muscle research.

"I oppose it partly because, even though it's a dire situation, I think that there could have been ways" to save it, Lehrer said.

In a letter to members of the corporation explaining his decision to vote against closing, he questioned whether certain decisions exacerbated the financial problems, including expenditures to support new staff.

"Perhaps due to our unique character we needed a smaller footprint with more recognizable expertise that we could more easily be identified with," Lehrer wrote.

Endre Balazs, a cofounder of the institute who is in his 90s, recalled that in its early days the place functioned in a more egalitarian way. Instead of having one director, scientists would take rotating control of managing the institute, in shifts that would last a few years.

"What I made, what I created, was really an institution decades ago that had a different concept of how to do it," Balazs said.

Janet Denlinger, a former scientist at Boston Biomedical who is married to Balazs, was critical of a change in the organizational structure that gave more power to the director. Denlinger also said not enough was done to raise funds over recent years, and questioned Emerson's compensation, which in 2010 was over \$400,000, putting him among the top 20 salaried research institute leaders in the country, according to Genetic Engineering & Biotechnology News.

Emerson said his salary was determined by the board and partially funded through the grants he

received. At the request of the Globe, Lawrence Associates, a Wellesley compensation consulting firm, analyzed Emerson's compensation and found he was paid close to what they predicted, compared to directors of other research institutions.

Those who face the vote have a tough decision to make. Andrew Bohm, who started his career at the institute and is a member of the corporation, said he left in 2003 because he sought the greater stability of a larger organization. But he added that the environment there was unique and in many ways ideal.

"There were far, far fewer distractions from research, and the institute actually was much more nimble," said Bohm, who is an associate professor of biochemistry at Tufts University School of Medicine. "Faculty actually spent at least some time at the bench doing experiments, alongside the people in their labs. And what happens when you're at a medical school, or any educational institution when you're teaching, you need a great deal of discipline to both do your teaching and run experiments at the same time."

Bohm said he plans to vote against closing, waiting at least until the building is sold so that it can be determined what is salvageable, and whether it is financially viable for a smaller institute to emerge.

Louis Kunkel, a professor of genetics and pediatrics at Harvard Medical School and Boston Children's Hospital, said he visits the institute about twice a month and appreciates the collegial atmosphere. He and Emerson codirect a center focused on a form of muscular dystrophy. He said that what is happening in Watertown is a more extreme example of what every major research institution is facing.

"In today's age, you need to have some size; you also need financial backing. You can't just rely on the NIH and private foundations for your support," Kunkel said. "You need an endowment that's large enough to tide you through hard times."

Boston Biomedical Research Institute through the years

1968

Boston Biomedical Research Institute is founded, sharing space on Staniford Street.

1972 - 1979

The muscle research program does fundamental work on proteins that are a key component of skeletal and cardiac muscles.

1982

The institute files its first patent on an immune system technology, later licensed to a pharmaceutical company as a cancer therapy.

2000

The institute moves to Watertown.

2008

The institute receives a \$9 million federal grant to open a center focused on a form of muscular dystrophy.

2012

Trustees recommend dissolving the institute.

Carolyn Y. Johnson can be reached at cjohnson@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@carolynjohnson](https://twitter.com/carolynjohnson).