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Currents

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Program Update ([The Gemini Opportunity](#)): There is an opportunity for the US to acquire more nights on the Gemini telescopes given the recent interest by the UK in selling some of their Gemini time. This opportunity is related to the issue of how the Gemini partnership might evolve over the long term for the benefit of the US community. **We ask you to [respond to a short survey](#) regarding the need for the US to acquire additional nights on Gemini.**

NOAO Close Up ([Questions for David Silva, Incoming NOAO Director](#)): *Currents* talks with David Silva about his current thoughts and upcoming plans for NOAO. Silva describes his view of the opportunities open to NOAO, the challenges facing the organization, and his approach to making rapid progress. He also describes the importance of community input and his thoughts on connecting with a broad cross-section of the community.

GSMT Update: We recently circulated by email an invitation for the community to participate in the workshop "[Science with Giant Telescopes: Public Participation in TMT and GMT](#)" (15-18 June 2008 in Chicago). Workshop participants will discuss the opportunities for public involvement in planning and executing GSMT science programs, specifying and constructing instruments, defining operation modes and the time allocation process, the processing, archiving, and public distribution of data products, and integrating GSMT into the full system of US astronomical facilities. The workshop proceedings will be used as input to the next Decadal Survey, where a high ranking for GSMT is vital for continued progress. We encourage all interested members of the US community to attend the workshop and make their views known.



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The Gemini Opportunity—An Update

Despite the fact that the UK has announced that they will remain in the Gemini partnership, it is likely that over the next few years, and perhaps months, there will be an opportunity for change. The UK funding agency, the Science and Technology

Facilities Council (STFC), has indicated their interest in selling some of their Gemini time. The international agreement allows this, though Gemini Board approval would be needed to sell time outside of the current partnership. Discussions that have been reported suggest that the UK will seek to sell 12% of the total Gemini time and that Australia would like 4%, leaving up to 8% of the total Gemini time as a possible increment to the US share.

Why should we be interested? As detailed in the [last edition of *Currents*](#), US proposers oversubscribe the available Gemini time by a large factor, typically 4-6. Papers based on Gemini data are being written and published at a rate commensurate with other similar facilities. Most important, however, is the opportunity to change the relationship between Gemini and the US community in a way that ensures a close alignment between the capabilities and operations modes that the community desires and those that Gemini provides.

With its international partnership responsibility and independent Board structure, Gemini has taken the position of formulating its plan based on a broad range of input from the partner countries, including interactions both with the national project offices and with individuals from the communities. Consequently, the capabilities that Gemini offers do not flow from a strategic vision of the entire US ground-based optical-infrared system.

There are certainly reasons for thinking that this is the time for consideration of a change in this arrangement. The most recent AAAC report (2008) states, "While recent metrics of publications per telescope have shown that Gemini is at parity with other 8-meter-class telescopes, there is a perception within significant sections of the US community that Gemini is not yet playing in the same league as the ESO VLT, Keck, and Subaru." Furthermore, the report notes that "Coherent planning across these facilities [Gemini and NOAO], within the context of a national optical-infrared observatory, would minimize overhead and optimize limited resources... A larger role (share) in Gemini for the US might facilitate the development of a stronger national capability in optical-infrared astronomy."

In concert with this perspective, NOAO has just initiated a community study of the large telescope (6.5-10 m) part of the US system, including Gemini. This study will have goals and will be carried out in a way similar to [the recent ReSTAR committee study](#). It will focus on what the community desires in terms of capabilities and access to telescopes in this size range. Larry Ramsey, from Pennsylvania State University, will chair this committee. The committee is expected to issue its report about a year from now.

That year-long timescale, however, is too long for the more limited question that is being posed now, and so, as we promised would be the case for *Currents*, we are asking for your input. We have established [a simple survey](#), with which you can send us your answers to the following questions:



Gemini North



Gemini South

- Bearing in mind that any purchase will need to be accompanied by a marginal budgetary commitment, is there a strong need for the US to acquire additional nights on Gemini and should this be set as a high priority for NSF?
- Is there a benefit in seeking to acquire these through an additional **share** of Gemini as an alternative to simply **buying nights**?

The AURA member representatives will provide feedback to NOAO on this issue at their April meeting. However, we hope to receive input from the broader NOAO community as well. So please respond to the survey to make your views known! We will report on the results of this survey in the next issue of *Currents*.

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Questions for David Silva, Incoming NOAO Director

David Silva was named the new NOAO Director in an announcement made by AURA on March 25. He will begin a five-year term on July 7. As NOAO Director, Silva will be responsible for all of NOAO operations and development. Silva brings to the position a long history of service to NOAO as well as strategic leadership and management experience. He is currently the Observatory Scientist for the Thirty Meter Telescope project. Prior to that, he was responsible for data management and user support at the European Southern Observatory. From 1991 to 1996, Silva was a member of the NOAO scientific staff. He served as project manager during the commissioning of the WIYN 3.5-meter telescope and as a staff astronomer in the US Gemini Program. Silva received his PhD from the University of Michigan in 1991 and a bachelor of sciences degree from the University of Arizona. *Currents* talked with Silva about his current thoughts and upcoming plans for NOAO.



David Silva

***Currents*: What do you see as the major opportunities open to NOAO in the next few years?**

Silva: I see several opportunities for NOAO to enhance the science capabilities that it provides to the US astronomical community.

- We have a mandate from the Senior Review to revitalize the core science infrastructure at KPNO and CTIO, with an emphasis on new spectrographs for 4-meter-class telescopes.
- There is an emerging consensus, most recently articulated in the report from the Astronomy and Astrophysics Advisory Committee (AAAC), that both scientific and budgetary benefits could be gained from developing a much closer linkage between Gemini and NOAO.
- We also have the opportunity to enhance the national system of science capabilities, especially through instrument deployment initiatives such as TSIP and by assuring good user support at all system facilities during open access time.
- Over the longer term, we look forward to the era of LSST and GSMT. Currently, NOAO has a significant role in LSST through its work on the telescope and the site and in providing community access to the planning

process via the LSST science teams. The NOAO GSMT Program Office is the current focus for the discussion of the US Extremely Large Telescope (ELT) strategy, which may evolve over time into NOAO involvement in one or more ELT partnerships. I believe NOAO can have a strong operational role in both LSST and GSMT, although the exact details will depend on the composition of the final partnerships.

Currents: What are the major challenges facing NOAO?

Silva: Continued National Science Foundation (NSF) support is needed to support the expanded and revitalized nighttime program that I described. Naturally, the NSF cannot provide such support unless they receive adequate funding from the federal government. Hence, like all other federally-supported science facilities and projects, NOAO is at the mercy of the annual federal budget process. That is our major uncertainty. We also have the challenge of maintaining and extending a cross-community consensus for a strong national observatory system that enables excellent science at both public and private observatories. Without such a consensus, I believe the entire US nighttime program, public and private, will suffer. I am optimistic that NOAO can work with the entire community to overcome these challenges in the years ahead.

Currents: What is your current strategy for capitalizing on the opportunities and meeting the challenges?

Silva: Looking outward, it is important to engage continuously with the various high-level committees that represent the interests of the US astrophysical community. In this regard, the recommendations of the Decadal Survey will be key to the future of NOAO. Looking inward, it is important to do a finite number of things well, rather than many things poorly. During my first three to six months, I intend to work with the NOAO scientific staff, as well as the AURA Observatory Council, NSF Program Review Panel, and NOAO Users' Committee, to refine our short-term and long-term goals and then push to achieve those goals as quickly as possible. We will be guided by the reports of high-level committees such as the AAAC and also by community-based committees such as ReSTAR (Renewing Small Telescopes for Astronomical Research) and the follow-on committee that will discuss larger aperture telescopes. I will present the outcome of those discussions in a future issue of *Currents* and at the January 2009 AAS meeting.

Currents: What role do you see for the community in this process?

Silva: NOAO serves the community, not vice versa. In addition to our on-going dialogue with the various community-based committees I mentioned above, I want to enable direct communication with a larger cross-section of the NOAO community. One approach that I am considering is having regular science workshops modeled on the Keck Science Meetings. Such a workshop would include opportunities not only for the NOAO community to present research highlights, but also for the community to engage in structured dialogues with NOAO senior managers (including myself) about strategic issues. It would provide a way to tap directly into the science interests and scientific excitement in the NOAO community to influence the capabilities and services that we deliver.

For more information on the appointment of David Silva as NOAO Director, see [NOAO Press Release 08-04](#).

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Contact Us

Did something interesting, inspiring, or surprising happen on a recent observing run? Please tell us about it! Is there a topic that you would like to see covered in a future *Currents*? If you are planning a regional astronomy meeting or department internal symposium, would you like someone from NOAO to give a presentation on our new program? Please contact us at currents@noao.edu. We look forward to hearing from you!

Currents is a sparkplug for communication between NOAO and our community. It provides updates—and solicits community input—on NOAO observing opportunities and NOAO programs and policies on a more rapid timescale than is possible with the quarterly NOAO Newsletter.

NOAO is the national center for ground-based nighttime astronomy in the United States and is operated by the Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy (AURA), Inc. under cooperative agreement with the National Science Foundation.

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