

Alumni to Students: Yes, There

By Ramanuj Basu

Tsunami research. The halls of Congress. The future of nuclear power. Penguin propulsion. What do these things have in common?

They're all topics of conversation overheard at a recent Life After Caltech event presented by the Caltech Alumni

undergraduate and graduate, around the dining-room table. Founder and CEO of abInventio Alex Bäcker (PhD '02) was the guest for the inaugural event in February, with succeeding events featuring entrepreneurs and philanthropists Ken and Gabrielle

general (thus the foray into penguin propulsion), and that's a big part of the appeal. After brief remarks by the guest of honor, the conversation flows and anything is fair game. Often the talk shifts from discussions of career paths to another shared topic of interest: life at Caltech. "What was it like when you were here?" is a frequent question, and alumni provide a unique perspective, living "out there" but anchored by their Caltech experience.

A recent attendee commented, "We're very sheltered at Caltech, and it's very helpful to get 'reality checks' from people in the 'real world' from time to time." Here's a sampling of sound advice from alumni who've "been there, done that," culled from recent gatherings:



Former Facebook chief technology officer Adam D'Angelo (BS '06), in the brown T-shirt, proves that there is, indeed, Life After Caltech.

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Association. The program is designed to help current students hear from successful alumni in various fields, each of whom has taken a unique path following graduation from Caltech.

New this year, Life After Caltech brings alumni back to campus to connect with small groups of students over a shared meal at Caltech's Alumni House. A typical event finds an alumnus and about 10 students, both

Adelman (BS '86 and '87, respectively); lawyer Timothy Yoo (BS '04); technology entrepreneur Jim Fruchterman (BS and MS '80); and cofounder of Quora and former Facebook CTO Adam D'Angelo (BS '06).

These events aren't formal presentations by the alumni, and those attending aren't simply a captive audience. There's no PowerPoint; there's not even a computer in sight. The talk is

- Thinking about a career in business? Heed this: "You know you're good at *research*, but business is all about people. You have to be able to read *people*."
- Want to pitch an idea or a funding proposal? "Go to the guy at the top. Get the president or CEO to buy in." Sometimes doing it old-school is best: "Go meet people. Knock on doors."

is Life After Caltech!



- Hoping to launch a start-up? "It's difficult to start a company right out of college because you've never done anything." However, "Working at a start-up is a great way to learn."
- Want that to be an online service? "In order to get good at Internet products, you have to build a bunch of things for fun!" and then "Invite 200 friends, let them invite others, grow into an insiders' club, then open it up."

Two events in the series have featured several alumni guests each. Last March, students had the chance to sit and talk with members of the Caltech Alumni Association's all-volunteer board of directors. About 40 students signed up to join one alum for lunch at a small table, then mingle with the other alumni after the meal in a scene reminiscent of speed dating.

The same format was used in June's "Postdoc Special Edition" of Life After Caltech, when postdoctoral scholars

from Caltech and JPL sat and chatted with alumni from a variety of fields during an alfresco dinner at Alumni House. And, proving that sage advice doesn't come just from the alumni, a postdoc chimed in to suggest to other attendees, "If your proposal is turned down, call and ask for feedback."

What do the participating alumni get out of the program? After June's event, Bassil Dahiyat (PhD '98), cofounder of Xencor, remarked, "I enjoyed reconnecting with Caltech people, and regained perspective on what it is like for those finishing up their training." Those sentiments were echoed by Nicola Peill-Moelter (MS '93, PhD '97), now director of environmental sustainability at Akamai Technologies, who said, "I very much enjoyed spending time with the students and hearing about all the exciting things they are working on." And as the evening wrapped up, alumnus Phil Watts (PhD '97) leaned over to an attendee and said, "You and I have a lot of common interests. I'll get your number and we'll keep in touch."

The Caltech Alumni Association's mission of "strengthening the ties of goodwill and communication between the Institute, its alumni, and its students" is well-served by the Life After Caltech series and a wide variety of other Association activities and services. Alumni who would like to get involved on campus or in their local communities should drop a line to volunteer@alumni.caltech.edu.

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