

COMMENTARY

SCHOLARSHIP AND BIOLOGY: PROFESSOR ROSS FELDBERG

*Michael Shusterman**

Since 2001, Professor Ross Feldberg of the Biology Department of Tufts University has served as the principle Faculty Adviser for TuftScope. An Associate Professor of Biology, who has taught for over thirty years, Professor Feldberg will soon be retiring from his position. In this special commentary we provide a brief biographical perspective into the career and biosocial interests of Professor Feldberg.

Education and Research

Dr. Ross Feldberg completed his undergraduate studies at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana in 1965, receiving a diploma in chemistry. He went on to pursue graduate studies in biochemistry at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and received a Ph.D. from the Department of Biochemistry of the Medical School in 1970. His postdoctoral work took him on a unique journey to the University of Aberdeen in Scotland from 1970 – 1972, and was followed by a second fellowship at Brandeis University in the laboratory of Lawrence Grossman from 1972 – 1975. He worked in DNA repair during his time in the Grossman Laboratory, and continued this work after coming to Tufts as an Assistant Professor in 1975.

During his early research career, Professor Feldberg focused on a “damage-specific DNA binding protein from human cells.” Over the years his research interests gradually changed and he found himself involved in a variety of projects. His work has included studies on the ability of chemicals within garlic to retard bacterial/fungal growth and the role of hormones in inflammation. Prior to deciding to close his laboratory several years ago, Dr. Feldberg was involved in studying the effects of estrogen on male rats and how changes to the testosterone/estrogen ratio can induce prostate inflammation in male rats.

Professor Feldberg’s career at Tufts included the teaching of courses ranging from introductory biology (serving as course coordinator for many years), to biochemistry, biology research seminars, and his specially designed biosocial problems course.

Biosocial Interests

During the 1970’s Professor Feldberg was part of a progressive group of young faculty and scientists known as “Science for the People.” The organization produced a bimonthly publication and focused on exposing poorly planned and politically motivated scientific research. These included, among other things, associations made between criminality and race and ideas that XYY individuals had elevated ‘aggressiveness.’ After the group disbanded in the early 1980’s, Dr. Feldberg remained interested in the intersection of biology and society. With the advent of what is now the Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, he became inspired to offer a course on the intersection of politics, society, and biology. “Biosocial Problems in Con-

temporary America” (Bio 97) has been offered since 2001, and Dr. Feldberg has called this course the “hardest course” he has had to teach, because the “issues are complex, and not obvious.”

In addition to his early science activism, his interest in the subject stemmed in part from a series of publications in *Science* on topics that appeared to be highly appealing, but in fact were poorly researched and designed studies. For instance, work had been published stating that XYY individuals were prone to aggressive behavior based upon analysis of prison inmates. This led to the assumption that XYY individuals are more violent socially, yet larger studies demonstrated that most XYY males live perfectly normal lives, never running afoul of the law. Thus, the course was designed to analyze the research methodologies of such claims, look at myths generated by poorly constructed studies, and examine the social biases and complexities of biological explanations of social problems.

Bio 97 has covered topics ranging from genetic determinism, gender and biology, behavioral genetics, homosexuality, and race and medicine were covered. Each of these issues, Professor Feldberg notes could take up an entire semester of study and are comprised of intricate subtleties. Many of the topics challenge standard perceptions of social and biological connections, often leading to conclusions that raise new and more difficult questions. In part, this was one of the reasons that Dr. Feldberg supported the creation of TuftScope, so as to develop a vehicle for the publication and discussion of complicated issues ranging from health to ethics and biosocial concerns. In his retirement, he hopes to devote more time to these concerns and address the serious implications of science as tool for understanding society and public policy.

TuftScope is honored to have had Professor Ross Feldberg serve as its adviser for these last eight years and is deeply grateful for his contributions to the expansion and development of the journal. We believe that his work both within the fields of biological research and his interest in science activism and biosocial concerns reflects a model for others to follow. As our modern world continues to face increasingly complicated concerns and scientific discoveries, individuals who can bridge these areas will continue to be necessary.

*Michael Shusterman is the Editor in Chief of *TuftScope*. Quotations and biographical information within this commentary were provided by Professor Ross Feldberg.