

First science adviser in US president's cabinet talks COVID, spying and more

Expectations are high for geneticist Eric Lander, who was sworn in as director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) on 2 June, after a months-long confirmation process. In a first for any US president, Joe Biden elevated the position of OSTP director to his cabinet, potentially granting Lander more access and influence than any science adviser before him. Lander has a decades-long reputation as a hard-charging and competitive leader. But he's also drawn criticism for some public moves: in 2016, for example, he wrote a history of CRISPR gene-editing technology that critics said diminished the foundational contributions of two women — Jennifer Doudna at the University of California, Berkeley, and Emmanuelle Charpentier at the Max Planck Unit for the Science of Pathogens in Berlin — who would later win a Nobel prize for their work. Lander later apologized. *Nature* spoke to him on his first day in office about the goals and priorities before him.



Eric Lander will be the first OSTP director to be a member of a US president's cabinet.

What does the United States need to do to prevent the next pandemic?

We cannot be self-satisfied because we were able to produce a vaccine in under a year and get it approved. We should take one brief victory lap for doing that, and then we've got to say: we've got to do better next time. Can we have a solution for any of the 25 families of human viruses? Can we spin up even more rapid diagnostics? There are a lot of discussions that will emerge in the coming weeks and months into a set of pretty bold goals for making sure we never again see infectious disease turn into a pandemic like this. And then we're going to have to hold our feet to the fire.

The Trump administration gutted government science offices and eroded science policies. Can science recover?

Science is so essential to the future of the nation and the world that, no matter what, science not only has to be bouncing back, but also going much further than before.

Something that is core to science is dissent. I think a really important question is how to protect the ability for scientists who have a divergent point of view to be able to express that in a constructive way, including scientists who might have a divergent view

from political appointees. I think we need to protect those sorts of things because it's the heart of the scientific method. It's about evidence, not authority.

Democratic senator Maria Cantwell of Washington state says you've agreed that workforce diversity will be the 'first task' for the OSTP. What's the plan?

The only goal we should be aiming for is to have parity. We're not going to succeed unless we have everybody at the lab bench. One of the early things the OSTP will be doing is reaching out to many groups who have experience with different types of solutions. I think the first thing to do is talk to the people who are most knowledgeable, most affected — and bring together that conversation.

You've said that all Americans must be able to participate in and benefit from science. What's the biggest challenge to that?

Let's start with the fact that science has always been unwelcoming to women and people of colour. This is a major priority — to make sure that we really eliminate that. There are large parts of the country that really don't have a science high school or a science industry — where somebody who's really interested in science can't easily get involved.

In academia, we should even ask questions

about the system of advising. It's a little bit of a medieval system, where you apprentice yourself to a single person. Maybe [more] welcoming communities have multiple mentors who are looking after people in different ways.

Scientists say that actions taken by the US government against research espionage have damaged scientific partnerships. How will you address this?

It's not acceptable if countries engage in industrial espionage to take intellectual property. The question is, how do you manage that in a way that is effective — addresses the problem, but doesn't create a sense of turning away international collaboration and doesn't promote racism? We have to balance two things: we have to get research security right, and we have to make sure we really take advantage of the full power of international scientific collaboration. We can get those things right with clear guidance about disclosure of information. And that's certainly going to be a role for this office — to look after both sides of that equation.

Interview by Nidhi Subbaraman

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.