

UI's Distinguished Faculty Hiring Program lands first 7 recruits

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Photo by: Provided

Qing Cao

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URBANA — Science historian David Sepkoski, a senior research scholar at Berlin's prestigious Max Planck Institute, has been looking for the right opportunity to return to a teaching position in the United States.

He found it at the University of Illinois, attracted by the strong history department, world-class STEM research, leadership in data science and a commitment to invest in his field.

A six-figure startup incentive from a new Distinguished Faculty Hiring Program didn't hurt, either.

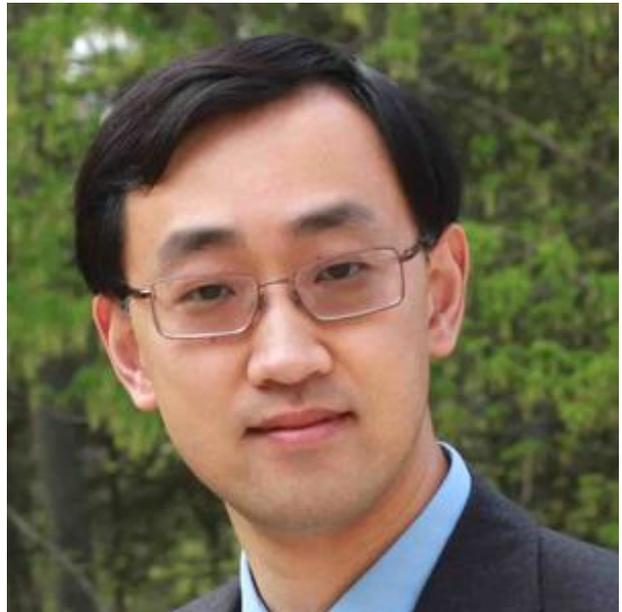
"This was the cherry on top of the sundae," Sepkoski said via email Monday from Berlin.

Sepkoski is one of seven academic stars who will join the UI's three campuses this fall under a program investing millions to recruit top faculty — and counteract poaching attempts by competing universities.

UI President Tim Killeen announced the new hires Monday, including two others at Urbana:

— Rodney Hopson, professor and associate dean for research in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University, who is a national expert in educational policy.

— Qing Cao, researcher at the IBM Watson Research Center and international leader in the science and engineering of nanoscale electronic devices.



The four other professors hired in Chicago and Springfield include experts in cancer research and treatment, stem cell and regenerative medicine, palliative care and pain management, and public budgeting and finance.

"These investments will expand our ranks of distinguished, world-class faculty, and further lift our standing as a global leader in education and discovery," Killeen said.

'There's a reputational boost'

First announced last year, the President's Distinguished Faculty Hiring Program provides \$60 million over three years to help departments fund startup packages for new faculty. It's designed to recruit professors of national and international stature who will attract students and funding to the three UI campuses.

Pension uncertainties, a state budget crisis and minimal raises had made Illinois a popular recruiting target for other universities in recent years.

"It's nice to be on the other end," said Executive Vice President Barbara Wilson. "Every single one of these hires has left a great institution. That's a signal that Illinois can still recruit the best."

Wilson, a former department head and dean, said recruiting an acclaimed tenured faculty member can be a "game-changer."

"First of all, the field notices, because senior people don't move very often," she said. "There's a reputational boost that's almost immediate. And everybody who works with someone like this benefits. These are people who galvanize others to work on collaborative activities."

Senior scholars bring in more grant money and postdoctoral researchers and have experience working with graduate students at the best institutions, she said. They bring creative ideas and a "spark of energy" that can change the curriculum and spur new research.

"People want to work with smart people," she said.

Some of the professors hired were already being sought by their respective departments, but not all.

"It usually requires a little something extra" to woo senior faculty members away from established positions, she said.

Each faculty hire received an average of \$1 million through the program, ranging from \$300,000 to \$1.5 million for some of the more lab-intensive research positions, she said.

'This made a big difference'

College of Education Dean James Anderson said the program made a difference in landing Hopson, who will join the Department of Educational Psychology. Hopson is former president of the American Evaluation Association, won its highest scholarly award and has attracted

more than \$5 million in grant funding from the National Science Foundation. His research focuses on the role of race, class and culture in the evaluation of science, technology, engineering and math programs and other educational initiatives.

"We've had our eye on him for quite some time. When we got the opportunity to go after him, this made a big difference," Anderson said. "He was being pursued heavily by some of our peers. By putting together this package and this distinction, it gave us the competitive advantage.

"There will be students we will attract here because of him," he said.

David Cahill, head of the Department of Materials Science and Engineering, recruited Cao, who holds a UI chemistry degree and worked with noted Professor John Rogers, now based at Northwestern University. Cao was named one of Forbes Magazine's "Top 30 under 30" and one of the "35 Innovators under 35" by MIT Technology Review for his work on replacing silicon transistors with more efficient carbon nanotubes.

Cahill said the department had been recruiting Cao for awhile, and he had offers from two other schools. The hiring program doubled the \$1 million startup package funded by the department and College of Engineering.

"He's coming in as a person with a lot of experience and a lot of access to tremendous facilities at IBM," Cahill said, so the enhanced package will allow him to equip his lab and launch his academic career without delay.

More offers in works

The hiring program is funded by \$10 million a year from the offices of the president and executive vice president and \$10 million in matching funds from the three campuses collectively.

The money is used to buy equipment, renovate labs and classrooms, support graduate assistants and other needs associated with research and teaching. Faculty salaries are not included and are covered by the campuses.

The goal is to hire 10 to 15 faculty each year, or up to 45 over three years. Wilson said at least three other professors are still weighing offers or being reviewed. The program will operate year-round, not just during the spring hiring season, she added.

Big plans for funds

Sepkoski, whose late father was a noted University of Chicago paleontologist, blends history and data science in his research on the history of STEM fields. His newest book focuses on the development of scientific theories about extinction. His work has been supported by the NSF, and he will hold the Thomas M. Siebel Chair in History of Science at the UI.

He plans to use his incentive package to pay for assistantships to support graduate students and teaching initiatives in the history of science and medicine; scholarships to recruit undergraduates from underrepresented communities to major in history; and a series of public talks by prominent scholars about the impact of science on society.

He also hopes to collaborate with the School of Information Sciences and other units on new interdisciplinary programs.

"This will be an exciting environment for research and teaching," said Sekoski, who grew up in Chicago. "I couldn't be happier about the move."

Distinguished faculty hires at other campuses

Chicago

— **Eben Alsberg**, a professor at Case Western University's biomedical engineering programs, which is one of the top in the country. His expertise is in the area of stem-cell regeneration, with a particular focus on the creation of biologic replacements to repair damaged and diseased tissues in the head, neck and thorax.

— **Ardith Zwyghuizen Doorenbos**, professor at the University of Washington and international expert on pain and symptom management, with more than \$11 million in research funding. Her recent work focuses on testing integrative therapies for military service members at risk of opioid abuse, as well as adolescents with chronic pain.

— **John Stewart IV**, award-winning professor at Duke University and chief of surgical services at Durham Veterans Administration Medical Center. He has developed pioneering approaches to immunotherapy for late-stage melanoma and holds several patents for new drug treatments.

Springfield

— **Kenneth Kriz**, professor at Wichita State University and a leading scholar of public finance and budgeting. His research focuses on the financial impact of borrowing by state and local governments on public-pension funding. He will be inaugural director of the Institute for Illinois Public Finance at UI Springfield, to be launched this fall.